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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I seek to address the following questions: how do practitioners of traditional knowledge legitimate their authority in the contemporary world? And what, in turn, defines a practice as "traditional"? In particular, I look at the ways that practitioners of siddha medicine, a Tamil South Indian medical system, defend their practice in a landscape marked by a variety of medical choices. The practices of doctors, and the decisions of patients, are forged out of a myriad of concerns that are much more complex than straightforward belief that a particular practice "works." In the context of competing medical systems, the politics of culture and identity are important factors in the bid for medical authority. I explore the character of some of these concerns through an examination of the "traditional" aspects of traditional medicine.

For siddha practitioners, the legitimation of authority has become a primary concern, especially with the institutional and practical successes enjoyed by biomedicine throughout India in the twentieth century. Drawing on a rhetoric of Tamil ethnic pride, siddha healers situate their system in a nationalist history of Tamil community and tradition. They characterize their practice as a "holy science," emphasizing the scientific features in asserting its difference from Ayurveda, another Indian medical system, while celebrating the extraordinary abilities of the ascetic founders of siddha medicine in claiming its superiority to biomedicine.

In examining a traditional medical system in the modern world, the dissertation foregrounds the role of ethnic identity in the bid for religious and scientific authority. As a site for imagining the world, traditional space becomes particularly important for communities who have been disempowered in their material, economic, or political relationships vis-à-vis other communities. By asserting the character of their medical practice as a *tradition*, siddha practitioners not

only attempt to shield their practices from external scrutiny, but they also affirm and shape a diachronic, Tamil community.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the following pages, I seek to address the following question: how do practitioners of "traditional" knowledge legitimate their authority in the contemporary world? By posing the question in this way, I do not mean to imply a dichotomy between the rationality of the contemporary world and the irrationality of tradition. My question is not that posed by Daniel Sperber, "how to account for apparently irrational beliefs?"[1] The competition of networks of knowledge and practice, in my mind and hopefully in South India as well, are adjudicated not only by rational considerations but also by economic, political, historical, and social relationships. To ask the question in a different way: in a South Indian landscape characterized by a plurality of medical discourses, how have Tamil siddha medical practitioners, operating outside the "official" patronage and financial and rhetorical support of the colonial British and the independent Indian state, continued to compete for clientele?

The history of the introduction of biomedicine in India and throughout the world is as much a history of imperialism as it is one of the spread of rationality.[2] While there are good studies in India on the spread of biomedicine with British expansion,[3] there are

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[1] Dan Sperber, "Apparently Irrational Beliefs," in *Rationality and Relativism*, ed. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), 150. Byron Good calls into question the universality of the "apparently irrational" and lays out a more relativist position in Byron J. Good, *Medicine, Rationality, and Experience: An Anthropological Perspective*, Lewis Henry Morgan Lecture Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 10.

[2] See David Arnold, ed., *Imperial Medicine and Indigenous Societies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); and Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, "Medicine, Colonialism and the Black Body," in their *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1992).

[3] In particular, see David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and Anil Kumar, *Medicine and the Raj: British Medical Policy in India, 1835-1911* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998).

few that address the response of indigenous practitioners.[4] In this dissertation, I explore the ways in which Tamil siddha medical practitioners, siddha *vaidyas*, have responded to the challenge of both British imperialism and, just as importantly, the homogenizing project of Indian nationalism. While the British did not distinguish pre-colonial medical practices, discounting them all as unscientific and degenerate, Indian nationalism sought to unify the diversity of indigenous practices into a single national system. As with other aspects of Indian nationalist culture, this medicine was to be based in Sanskrit texts, a bias which favored brahmanical learning and ayurvedic practices.[5] Siddha *vaidyas*, mostly non-brahmans and founding their practice on Tamil texts, were challenged in this way from "within" as well as from "without." Like all Indian *vaidyas*, they had to respond to the critique of biomedical doctors who had an entirely different history and tradition, and at the same time they sought to distinguish their system from the history and practice of ayurveda with which they shared much.

These medical considerations are, of course, just particular instances of more general discourses of Indian culture vis-à-vis the British, and of Indian culture vis-à-vis itself. In all of these debates, Tamil non-brahmans fared particularly badly. Orientalist scholarship on India tended to locate anything of worth in Indian civilization in its Vedic, "Aryan" features, which they opposed to the barbaric "Dravidian culture" that was representative of non-brahman South India.[6] Indian nationalism reflected the categories

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[4] A notable exception is the recent monograph by Jean M. Langford, *Fluent Bodies: Ayurvedic Remedies for Postcolonial Balance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

[5] In nationalist rhetoric, Ayurveda has been most often viewed as the original medicine of India, the Tamil texts simply plagiarized versions of the Sanskrit. For example, O. P. Jaggi mistakenly asserts that the Tamil siddha system of medicine is simply Ayurveda translated into Tamil. See O.P. Jaggi, *History of Science and Technology in India, Vol. V: Yogic and Tantric Medicine* (Delhi: Atma Ram and Sons, 1973), 127.

[6] For example, Wilber Theodore Elmore distinguishes Hinduism from Dravidian religion. Hinduism is the creation of Aryan brahmans, and is primarily theistic and philosophical, while Dravidian religion is characterized by rites that he terms "Dravidian devil worship." (8) Further characterizing the Dravidian religion are "repulsive" buffalo sacrifices, "horrible ceremonies" marked by the "cruel features"

and biases of this scholarship, formulating visions of an independent India that would nurture a civilization that was Sanskritic in its features. With independence and the victory of the Indian National Congress, the locus of political power not only shifted geographically to the north, but it also shifted in terms of caste in Tamil-speaking areas, as Tamil brahmans held the leadership of the Congress party in Tamil Nadu.

The modern formulation of siddha medicine is at the same time a form of social protest. It is an attempt to rescue siddha medicine, Tamil tradition, and the non-brahman Tamil people from obscurity. It is an attempt to gain control over a world in which non-brahman Tamils have felt subjected. This reformulation of siddha medicine is intimately tied to a politics of identity, in which elite non-brahmans have formulated notions of a non-brahman Tamil community, seeking to liberate non-brahman Tamils from their status as subjects to North Indians, to brahmans, to the British, and to "the West."

1.1 Traditional Medicine

The growth of two academic disciplines, medical anthropology and the history of science, has resulted in a much better understanding of traditional medical systems throughout the world. Much of this literature has focused on cultural notions of medicine, attending to specific configurations of disease, the body, diagnostic procedures, cures, and so on. Similar reflection on the prior term, "traditional," is largely absent. While some have interrogated and questioned the qualifying terminology for the medicine that is defined in opposition to traditional medicine, i.e., biomedicine, modern medicine, scientific medicine, Western medicine, or "cosmopolitan" medicine, too little attention

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of animal sacrifice. (16) Their worship of the goddess Shakti "are exceedingly loathsome and immoral," and perhaps even involved human sacrifice that may exist today: "we may well believe that the lonely depths of the forest still witness these terrible scenes." (45) Dravidian religion lacks writing, systems of philosophy or theology. (59) Contemporary Dravidians "stand where their ancestors did when they worshiped devils in the gloomy forests at the time of the Aryan invasion." (114). Wilber Theodore Elmore, *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism: A Study of the Local and Village Deities of Southern India*. (Madras: The Christian Literature Society for India, 1925).

has been placed on the "traditional" of medicine.[7] As I began to study the writings of siddha *vaidyas* in South India, it became clear that the status of their practice as a particular, local "tradition" has been central to their bid for authority. In the past century, siddha *vaidyas* have located their knowledge in revivalist narratives of a non-brahman Tamil tradition. In doing so, the specific qualities in which they define this tradition – rationality, ancientness, egalitarianism, and a timeless essence – have become the criteria through which *vaidyas* shape their modern practice. By focusing on siddha medicine as a *traditional* medicine, that is, as part of a broader discourse on tradition, I hope to shed light on the nature of authority in the contemporary world.

Why look at medicine to study the features of tradition? Why not look at those aspects of culture which are more central to tradition, such as religion, for example? Why, as a historian of religion, have I chosen to look at medicine instead of religion?

The nature of these questions reveals a particular notion of tradition that I wish to dispel, namely, that "tradition" is the realm of the irrational, an arena of human knowledge and practice that is opposed to rational science, or "modernity." This dichotomy of tradition and modernity is primary in most contemporary accounts of tradition (and also modernity), yet it is one that I will question in the following pages. I will spell out my reasons for questioning this dichotomy in the pages to come, but I can anticipate my argument in its most compact form here: traditions are modern and rational. They are modern because they are present in the world today, and they are rational in Weber's sense of *Zweckrationalität* (instrumental rationality) – they use effective means to achieve specified goals, goals which, as with any project, are always irrational. Insofar as practitioners of traditional medicine claim that their knowledge is both scientific and traditional, their rhetoric provides a rich point of entry into considerations of the

[7] "Editor's Introduction," in *Paths to Asian Medical Knowledge*, edited by Charles Leslie and Allan Young (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1993), 6.

relationship between these often opposed terms. In defending their knowledge, siddha *vaidyas* join a discourse of science and practical efficacy with religious, political and traditional discourses, making this a germane topic for study in the history of religions.

Indeed, among those practices that have come to constitute modern "traditions," it is medicine that has clashed most directly with political forces that have asserted Western scientific traditions as the standard of truth. In the matter of control over the bodies of Indians, indigenous medicine presented a much greater challenge to the British than did Indian literature, the arts, dance, and other elements that compose a tradition. Although there are today signs of change, traditional medical systems have been particularly criticized by an expanding, technologically sophisticated, and well-funded biomedicine. The globalization of biomedicine has not occurred only, or perhaps even primarily, due to its superior account of natural processes, nor even due to its technical ability to cure, but also because it has been part of the arsenal of imperial domination.

While I have spoken in terms of biomedicine challenging traditional medicine, one can reverse this equation. After all, to a greater degree than in the "pure sciences" or mathematics, medical truth is difficult to adjudicate, given the complexity of bodies and the ambiguous nature of health. The failures of any system of medicine are many, and it is in the gaps and uncertainties of clinical medicine that other medical theories and practices have sought to establish their relevance.[8] There has always been ample room to challenge the advance of biomedicine, which is perhaps part of the reason that biomedical critiques of traditional practices have been so passionate. There is much, of course, at stake in medical practice – it is a matter of life and death. While the choice of the wrong religion might doom one to hell in the afterlife, the choice of the wrong medicine will make this afterlife come sooner than expected.

[8] Thus siddha practitioners today speak of *muppu*, a preparation that will bestow the eternal life that eludes biomedicine.

I will argue in the following pages that one of the ways indigenous medical practitioners have responded to the challenge of biomedicine has been to emphasize their knowledge as part of a tradition, and thereby to assert that their practice remains central to the identity of a community. There have been few attempts within the history of religions to articulate the particular force of tradition. Tradition, for example, is absent in a recent compilation of *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, which does not neglect to include that most common analytic foil of tradition, "modernity."[9] Sociologists and historians have paid more attention to the concept of tradition, but this literature has not been properly taken up in religious studies. It is a strange neglect, given that much of the field of religious studies is organized according to religious traditions. In the study of South Asian religions, many have rightly questioned the usefulness of Hinduism as an analytic category, yet these reflections have not been extended to the more general category of "tradition." Perhaps accepting and conflating the dichotomies of science/religion and modernity/tradition, scholars of religion have not felt the need to treat tradition as a distinct feature of religious activity. While theoretical examinations of the concept of religion compose a vast literature, there is a dearth of similar examinations of tradition. Here I do not provide an account of this scholarly history, but rather hope to make a contribution to better understand what is entailed in calling something a tradition.

1.2 Tradition

Marx's notion of tradition is a good place to start, not only because of the influence of the following passage, but also because he articulates a prevalent account of the force of tradition.

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[9] Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.[10]

Marx's observation that the conscious utilization of elements of tradition in times of radical social change is one that I will also make in analyzing the past century of writings of siddha *vaidyas* in South India. However, while for Marx tradition is comprised of static structures which bind actors to inevitable action, I will view tradition as dynamic, the "circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past" themselves negotiated, reformulated, abandoned, reinvented, and concealed. Even as the past constructs the present, as Marx rightly argues, the past is also remembered in the present, a process over which some individuals, and some societies, have more control than others. For those whose control over present circumstances is tenuous, whose agency in material worlds is limited vis-à-vis other societies, flights into the non-material worlds of the past, or of religion, are efforts to exert control over worlds of imagination in the midst of material and bodily subjection.[11] In this dissertation, I will attend to the material bases of ideological and fantastic imaginings and to the medical and social goals of these imaginings.

What Marx neglects to mention is that for many, this "nightmare" of tradition is a refuge into realms of human experience over which actors can continue to exert control.

[10] Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2d ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1978), 595.

[11] Following Benedict Anderson, I hold imagination to be one of the primary arenas of human activity, not an illusion that gives consolation to those who lack material resources. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised ed. (New York: Verso, 1991).

Indeed, tradition, reconfigured by contemporary agendas, is precisely that realm of human practices and forms of knowledge that communities consider to be their own. Duty and loyalty to tradition are celebrated as the recognition of the harmonious conjunction of personal essence and social forms of knowledge and practice. Non-brahman Tamil leaders express the reward of adherence to tradition as the recovery of a utopian society, a reunion with the divine, a scientific revolution that will place the Tamil sciences at the apex of the world's systems of knowledge, and bodily health within the community culminating in, perhaps, immortality for all.

To foreshadow and orient the following discussion, I will here briefly set out my notion of tradition, which will more clear in its general contours in the extended discussion that follows. Following Weber, I will focus on tradition as involving both action and authority. That is to say, any tradition joins content – the rituals, texts, heroic figures, and any other substantial and ideal material, i.e., a canon – with hermeneutics, interpretations of this canon that inform specific configurations of community. Such formulations of traditions and community affirm a synchronic bond between actors and extend that bond into the past, into a diachronic community. Thus, traditional action involves reverence towards past action, actors, practices, and knowledge as holding a value that cannot, or at least has not, been superceded. Traditions, however, are not only about the past, but they are also about the present over which the past is seen to retain its relevance, even as they provide models for future action. When a siddha *vaidya* narrates a perfect medical tradition prior to Sanskritic influence, he also asserts an agenda for the future, a project which would involve the purification of siddha knowledge of all its Sanskritic elements. In valuing the past, a traditional orientation will tend towards conservatism rather than innovation, but it is not as static as it appears or claims to be.

Tamils often speak of "*Tamiḻuṇarvu*," Tamil-feeling, or "*Tamiḻpaṟṟu*," Tamil-devotion. Tamil-feeling points to an emotion orientation, a centripetal movement towards

a Tamil community. *Paṟṟu*, as Sumathi Ramaswamy has pointed out, carries the sense of adherence, devotion, attachment, and affection.[12] More literally, it means holding, a grasping onto, retention. In terms of tradition, then, *Tamiḻpaṟṟu* is a dedication to community, but the particular sort of dedication that grasps or retains what has come before. Adherence to tradition is both a commitment and a duty to a community that existed in the past, exists in the present, and will continue to exist as long as its members do not abandon it. In other words, the character often attributed to tradition is *timeliness*, relevance in all times, and at the same time this attribute paradoxically becomes the grounds for a claim to the *timelessness* of tradition, its eternal essence. Adherence to tradition is an orientation that conceives of a timeless community, and is borne of the desire to submerge one's personal identity into a larger community which is prior to the birth of that individual and which will continue after her death. The desire for tradition is thus also a desire for immortality. It is perhaps no coincidence that siddha *vaidyas* often assert that the perfection of their tradition, its recovery in its absolute purity, will bring with it medicines that will rejuvenate, cure all ills, from cancer to asthma to AIDS, and preserve Tamil bodies for eternity.

1.2.1 The Duration of Tradition

Any evocation of tradition marks an attempt to forge a connection with the past. Many have therefore concluded that it is essential for a tradition to have actually been transmitted from one generation to another. Edward Shils, for example, argues that tradition must span at least three generations, and that anything passed down for less is not tradition but fashion.[13] The problem with this sort of argument is that it does not give

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[12] On *Tamiḻpaṟṟu*, see Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 6.

[13] Edward Shils, *Tradition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 15.

due attention to the way traditions change, as they always do, both in their actual content and in their interpretation. Traditions are *never* static, but always change with historical circumstances. The analysis of tradition as constant across generations would necessitate the impossibly imprecise task of *measuring* meaningful change.

Furthermore, it seems to me that Shils has missed Weber's crucial analysis of tradition as a type of *authority*. The assertion that a particular practice connects present actors to past actors, an assertion that is meant to garner authority for that practice, is more important than whether or not past actors actually engaged in that practice. The agency of tradition lies more with those who accept knowledge as prior than with those pass down knowledge, which is merely to say that the activity of making and perpetuating a tradition is more an activity of the living than of the dead.

What is required, then, is an account of tradition that considers its synchronic employment as a strategy of legitimation, where I understand synchrony as a position in complex historical contexts. Tradition gains it authority from its context, in which the important parameters are, following Bruce Lincoln's account of authority, "the conjuncture of the right speaker, the right speech and delivery, the right staging and props, the right time and place, and an audience whose historically and culturally conditioned expectations establish the parameters of what is judged 'right' in all these instances."[14] The synchrony implied by this sort of "conjunction" is not that of Saussure or Levi-Strauss; it is not a non-historical "pure" synchrony which determines history, but is itself constructed through history and therefore it is in constant flux.[15] Indeed, as will become clear in this dissertation, the "tradition" of siddha medicine has radically

[14] Bruce Lincoln, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 11.

[15] As Marshall Sahlins points out, one must attend to the "cultural life of the elementary forms." Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), xv.

changed, most clearly and obviously in its content, but just as importantly in its form, i.e., in the boundaries within which it is drawn, in the function it is called upon to serve, and in the emotions it is meant to evoke.

1.2.2 Tradition as Imitation

Max Weber locates traditional action in his typology of meaningful social action. Social action is action in which "the actor's behavior is meaningfully oriented to that of others." This excludes actions like the raising of an umbrella with the onset of rain, which might look like a coordinated social action (as everyone on the street will open their umbrellas at the same time) but which is oriented towards natural, not social, concerns. Weber also excludes action that is completely determined by "crowd psychology," since action is only meaningful if it is not strictly determined, i.e., if it allows for conscious choice.

Weber further excludes "imitation" as meaningful social action, because it is "causally determined by the action of others, but not meaningfully."[16] He proposes four types of social action: (1) instrumentally rational; (2) value-rational; (3) affectual; and (4) traditional. Traditional social action is distinct in that it is "determined by ingrained habituation." In other words, it is hardly meaningful action at all.

> Strictly traditional behavior, like the reactive type of imitation discussed above, lies very close to the borderline of what can justifiably be called meaningfully oriented action, and indeed often on the other side. For it is very often a matter of almost automatic reaction to habitual stimuli which guide behavior in a course which has been repeatedly followed.[17]

In fact, his equation of habit with tradition is almost complete: "The great bulk of all everyday action to which people have become habitually accustomed approaches this

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[16] Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 23-24.

[17] Ibid., 24-25.

[traditional] type."[18] Against this characterization, I argue that traditional action is always meaningful, if not always conscious (and thus I depart from Weber again), because it always has the effect of unifying individuals into synchronic and diachronic configurations of community. Moreover, those aspects of tradition that are most consciously celebrated by a community are also often the most "traditional."

1.2.3 Tradition as Invention

If Weber's primary representation of traditional action is as imitation or habit, a radically different view is presented by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in their examination of "invented traditions." "'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past."[19] This language of invention, an antonym of imitation, has the advantage of registering traditions as actively and consciously engaged and constructed by historical actors.

While Hobsbawm and Ranger celebrate that the study of the invention of tradition "throws a considerable light on the human relation to the past, and therefore on the historian's own subject and craft," in their focus on invention they too often underestimate the conservative forces of history, tradition in Marx's and Weber's sense as comprised of structures formed through history that limit the range of possible action. As Alasdair MacIntyre notes, "What I am, therefore, is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present. I find myself part of a history and that

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[18] Ibid., 25.

[19] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, ed., *The Invention of Tradition* (New York : Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition."[20] Tradition is never produced but reproduced.

To overstate both cases, while for Weber the connection between the present and the past implied by tradition was absolutely dependent and mechanical, accompanied by a radical unconsciousness of this fact, the invention of tradition assumes an absolute autonomy of and control over the present, possible because of a radical consciousness of the processes of history. This raises an obvious question: what lies between these two extremes? The complexity of the dialectic between history and the present, and the location of tradition in this dialectic, need to be more closely examined.

1.2.4 The Consciousness of Tradition

If tradition is an orientation to the past, then this orientation can hold for greater or lesser degrees of consciousness. It is primarily the consciousness of action which distinguishes tradition as imitation from tradition as invention. Tradition incorporates both of these extremes, insofar as both imitation and invention can be actions which entail the authority of the past in forging community. There are traditions which are unconscious, taken for granted, but which nevertheless are implicitly cognized (if not re-cognized). Such cognition, when it affirms a bond between participants that is both synchronic and diachronic, is a tradition. On the other end of the spectrum are rituals, forms of knowledge and practice, texts, anything that symbolize the diachrony of community. These practices are deliberately articulated as traditions, serving as central, visible representations of community. They may or may not have been performed in the past, but they are considered to forge a link between present and past manifestations of a single, continuous community.

[20] Aladair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 221.

This notion of tradition corresponds quite closely to Jean and John Comaroffs' account of hegemony and ideology as "the ends of a continuum."[21] Where hegemony and ideology differ is in the degree to which they are articulated. Hegemony is primarily implicit, taken for granted, naturalized, and habit-forming, while ideology is explicit, articulated, and therefore more open to contestation. "Hegemony homogenizes, ideology articulates. Hegemony, at its most effective, is mute; by contrast, 'all the while, ideology babbles on.'"[22] The crucial element which links these in a continuum of power is consciousness. "For what differentiates hegemony from ideology, one face of power from the other, is not some existential essence. It is the factor of human consciousness and the modes of representation that bear it."[23] When tradition is followed more or less unconsciously, i.e., when particular practices link actors synchronically in a community that imagines itself as a historical community in a way that this community is itself taken for granted, its power is hegemonic. When tradition is "invented," when it is consciously and expansively articulated, when its contours and content become points of contention, when arguments are made for the very criteria by which practices or people are considered to be part of a community, tradition becomes ideological.

1.2.5 The Ideology of Tradition

If the Comaroffs' distinction between ideology and hegemony is analytically valuable in distinguishing different poles of the modes of tradition, it also suggests historical processes and shifts. Because tradition is never "purely" ideological or hegemonic, the place that it occupies on this continuum will change with time and place. Radical historical transformations will tend to turn hegemony into ideology, resulting

[21] Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 28.

[22] Ibid., 24.

[23] Ibid., 28.

from critique and engendering further critique, a process especially common with the intervention of a new force that is pursuing hegemony. Hobsbawm and Ranger likewise note that the invention of tradition is most prevalent in times of rapid social change.[24] One common effect of cultural interaction, then, is to illuminate hegemony, to enable reflection on criteria of authority. This consciousness of the underpinnings of authority is often the basis of a critique of that authority, leading to new formulations and justifications. While this might have beneficial effects, in that such conscious reflection on things previously taken for granted is one of the essential components of learning, cultural interactions are always concomitant with distinctions in power. While the "unveiling" of authority is never complete, neither is it evenly and mutually effected in the encounter of two societies. Indigenous Indian medical techniques were transformed in more crucial ways in the colonial encounter than were British techniques.

In this dissertation, I will examine articulations of tradition that are more conscious than unconscious, traditions that are debated, organized, formulated, and asserted. An actor deliberately and consciously represents something as a tradition to perform the work of community-building, where those who can claim possession over that tradition are identified with a particular community. By "community" Dilip Menon's depiction serves us well:

> The idea of community represents an aspiration and not an achieved entity; it is always in the process of formation without reaching realisation . . . . Moreover, there can only be conjunctural creations of community when a temporary balance is achieved between diverse individual initiatives and subjective perceptions of disparities.[25]

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[24] Hobsbawm and Ranger, 4.

[25] Dilip M. Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar, 1900-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 4.

Such idealized communities do not precisely correspond to actual social situations, yet their construction and self-perception are real social processes which have significant social effects – thus we can speak of the reality of imagined identities.

In a prior section, I argued that invented traditions which falsely attribute a particular practice or narrative to past communities are still traditions if they successfully assert the authority of the past. As Louis Althusser argues for ideology, I hold that the analysis of tradition should be primarily concerned with its "practico-social function" rather than with its epistemological status.[26] Ideological statements do not simply reflect or represent reality, but also structure the way people discern meaning. Likewise, statements as to what constitutes a tradition themselves structure consciousness, history, and memories – they provide the representations through which actors come to understand their worlds. "Men 'live' their ideologies. . . . as their '*world*' itself. . . men live their actions in ideology, *by and through ideology*. . . the 'lived' relation between men and the world, including History (in political action or inaction) passes through ideology, or better, *is ideology itself*." [italics in original][27]

Because explicit formulations of tradition actively construct human experience, they are more than cynical instruments (as implied by "invention") with which one social group manipulates another. As Althusser holds for ideology, those who formulate the character and contents of a tradition are "caught by it, implicated by it, just when they are using it and believe themselves to be absolute masters of it."[28] While traditions are themselves constructed and modeled, they at the same time provide the models for a variety of practices and conceptions. Traditions are, to borrow Geertz's language of

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[26] Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Verso, 1996 [1965]), 231.

[27] Ibid., 233.

[28] Ibid., 234.

"cultural patterns," models of and models for. They "give meaning, that is objective conceptual form, to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves."[29] Actors perpetuate traditions, and allow themselves to be shaped by traditions, because tradition is not something constructed by prior autonomous subjects, but itself contributes to the construction of subjects insofar as it is prior to them. This suggests a methodological approach that I will follow here, which involves shifting back and forth between the past and the present, between prior forms and contemporary agendas.

What motivates formulations of tradition? Following Slavoj Zizek, I will argue that among the interests that compel adherence to traditions is the ideological fantasy, and the desire and enjoyment stimulated by this fantasy.[30] Those who actively shape traditions do not simply appeal to audiences to understand the truth of their message, but also invite them to participate in the narrative construction of a social self that provides the individual with comfort and enjoyment. In the Tamil case, the elaboration of a Tamil community and tradition is a call to a specified audience of non-brahman Tamils to imagine themselves as part of a utopian community, an ideal world in which the social body is absolutely unified. The price of participation is loyalty and adherence to the tradition and culture that constitute this community. In return for this loyalty, ideology offers a fantasy that itself is constitutive and will provide the subject with enjoyment. What is promised in the Tamil case is nothing less than utopia, the experience of divine bliss, and even the possibility of bodily immortality.

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[29] Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 93.

[30] Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989).

1.2.6 Tradition and Autonomy

While traditions turn attention inwards in focusing on a social self, they never exist in isolation from other traditions. In fact, traditions develop precisely in relationship to, and often in opposition to, other potential formations. The articulation of tradition alienates an other in order to unify a self, or conversely, it often unifies a self in order to repel an other. In this sense, traditions are always engaged with other traditions, and so community identity is formed in large measure on the basis of difference, as we will see in Tamil identity narratives.[31] In South Asia, indeed, throughout history and throughout the world, the relations between traditions often take the form of conflict, compelling discourses characterized by critique and defense.

The complexity of the issue of the translatability of culture is well-expressed in Alasdair MacIntyre's work. On one side of the debate are those who hold to the incommensurability of traditions, according to whom there is no independent standard that can be employed to adjudicate the claims of rival traditions, since there is no universal rationality than transcends historical contexts. The opposing position is that such incommensurability is an illusion, and that once one has the tools to translate both the arguments and standards of judgment of one tradition into the terms of another, common norms of evaluation can be ascertained.[32] While MacIntyre's discussion is complex, he dismisses the possibility of an ethics and a rationality that can be universalized outside the contexts of particular traditions, arguing that "all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought..."[33]

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[31] Stuart Hall argues that the assertion of difference is central to the formation of conceptions of identity and ethnicity. See Stuart Hall, "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference," in *Radical America* 23, no. 4 (October-December 1989), 9-20.

[32] Aladair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradtion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 4-5.

[33] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222.

I relate these two positions not to engage in the philosophical debate on this issue, but because these two positions have been employed by colonial authorities and by defenders of traditional medicine in South Asia over the past two centuries. In their critiques of indigenous medicine, biomedical doctors have argued for a singular rationality and a universal truth which they assert to be most fully exemplified in their own practice. Siddha practitioners invoke the principle of the incommensurability of traditions as a discursive strategy to counter the universalist challenge of those, both British and increasingly Indian, who have promoted biomedicine over the past two centuries. These *vaidyas* represent tradition as an autonomous realm which the critical gaze of an external, universalizing rationality cannot penetrate.

This sense of tradition shares much with the language that Levinas uses to describe the site of self-identification. It is a ground of possibility, an "'at home' which we inhabit."[34] The act of self-identification is forged not in isolation but begins with a relationship between an "I" and an external world that is radically other.

> "In a world which is from the first other the I is nonetheless autochthonous... It finds in the world a site and a home. Dwelling is the very mode of *maintaining oneself*, not as the famous serpent grasping itself by biting onto its tail, but as the body that, on the earth exterior to it, holds *itself* up and *can*. The 'at home' is not a container but a site where *I can*...The site, a medium, affords means. Everything is here, everything belongs to me...[35]

Tradition is the ground of autochthony, the site over which "I" can exercise control. It serves as the grounds for self, not a self that is prior to tradition, but a self which is forged in the very creation of tradition. To paraphrase Levinas, this home, this residence and

[34] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 33.

[35] Ibid., 37-38.

ground of the self, is not the end or goal of human activity but its condition, and so its commencement.[36]

While the construal of universalistic knowledge carries an unambiguous authority, true in all aspects, the consideration of knowledge as traditional carries far more ambiguous implications for authority. To designate the knowledge of an articulated social other as traditional is to ascribe to it the features of a *relative* efficacy, nostalgia, or even illusion. Yet to characterize the knowledge of one's own community as traditional can be a way to assert the authority of that knowledge as a creation of the genius of an ancient people. Generally, such emic emphases on knowledge as traditional are combined with universalistic ascription, where a form of knowledge is asserted to be both traditional *and* universal, a product of a historical people who got it right before all others. Levinas holds that a site of autonomy is also the basis of possession, enabling claims that external things are one's own, whether objects, knowledge, practices, people, or histories.[37] Indeed, Tamil revivalists, while utilizing the buffer of relativity offered by the autonomy of tradition, claim possession of the world's languages, civilizations, and sciences, characterizing their tradition as the original tradition, universal and total in both its historical compass and in its explanatory power.

In their critiques of biomedicine, for example, siddha *vaidyas* assert their own universalist credentials, claiming that their knowledge is the font of all medical knowledge. While those in the biomedical sciences pronounce the universality of their practice precisely by denying that their scientific method is specifically linked to a particular history and society, i.e., to a tradition (of course they are wrong in this), siddha

[36] Ibid., 152.

[37] People are particularly important in this regard. For example, Hindu nationalists claim assert the Hindu identity of dalits to win votes. Or, further afield, Jews have been posthumously "baptised" by Mormons to "save" them, Mormon notions of the afterlife, rituals of baptism, and the "proper" residence of Jewish souls serving as the grounds for their reclamation project.

practitioners often assert that the very cultural and historical specificity of their practice affirms its universal virtue. For these siddha *vaidyas*, tradition has served both as an autonomous realm over which they assert control, and at the same time it has become the basis of their global aspirations. The question of whether knowledge is universal or relative is not just an epistemological problem debated in philosophical arenas. Relativism and universalism are also *strategies* employed to legitimate knowledge in situations where the knowledge and practices of two communities come into conflict. Asserting both the particularity of traditional knowledge *and* its universal applicability is to claim for the community of that tradition the highest position in a hierarchy of communities.

1.2.7 Tradition and Belief

The relationship between a people and their tradition has been often viewed as motivated by belief. For example, Hindus are often said to worship an image at a temple because they believe that divinity is instantiated in that image. Belief in this sense is a cognitive act, a considered judgment that something is "true" according to some relevant criterion of authority. This sort of belief is certainly a goal of all formulations of tradition – they must appear credible to be successful, which is why Tamil revivalists seek to legitimate their views of history by invoking archeology and Orientalist history. However, there are many problems with making belief the sole, or even the primary, link between people and their traditions. Not the least of these, and perhaps the most problematic in analysis, is the difficulty in attributing belief to particular actors. How do we know whether someone really believes what they say? Belief is an internal, cognitive state, and so it is invisible to the analyst, unlike words and actions which can be examined.

Furthermore, belief itself cannot be separated in clear ways from motivation and interest. When siddha practitioners assert that their forbearers formulated a medicine that imparted immortality, they never do so solely because they believe it, but also because such assertions confer *value* on their practices. Statements about tradition do not just represent "real" processes as our modern sense of "belief" requires, but they are also meant to accomplish particular sorts of work. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in tracing a history of the notion of belief, points out that its medieval English connotations were close to its German counterpart, *belieben*, that is, "to hold dear," "to give allegiance, to be loyal to, to value highly."[38] It is this older sense of belief that more closely describes the *intentions* of *vaidyas* when they articulate their tradition: they do so not to provide an objective representation of things, but to instill the sentiments of affiliation, loyalty, and duty in a targeted audience.

Donald Lopez distinguishes between believing something and believing *in* something.[39] To believe something is a cognitive, reflective act, a particular relationship forged between a subject and an external object. To believe *in* something is a creative act, in that the statement of belief itself creates its object. An affirmation that "I believe in you" confers value and confidence on the person addressed. It is this latter sense of belief that describes the relationship between siddha *vaidyas* and their celebrations of a siddha medical tradition, in that these elegies themselves in part create the object of which they speak. They do not afford the sort of exteriority that we assume when we say that we "believe something." Indeed, their formulations of the origin, history, and nature of their knowledge is perhaps most accurately an "I believe in myself," formulations that are meant to confer *self*-confidence and *self*-respect on a medical tradition that has been

[38] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Belief and History* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1977), 41.

[39] Donald S. Lopez, Jr., "Belief," in Taylor, 22.

so roundly criticized by biomedical science. These articulations, as we will see, are therefore acts of *self*-creation in that they specify not only the value of the self, i.e., they argue for the glory of the siddha medical tradition, but they also define the *nature* of the self, i.e., they delineate *who* can claim a connection to siddha medical tradition and *what* can be the essential nature of this tradition.

1.2.8 Tamil Notions of Tradition

It might be objected that my formulation of the notion of a tradition is a culturally-bounded category that should not be applied outside its particular linguistic and historical context. While this objection certainly highlights an important and always worrisome problem when writing about one culture in the language of another, I would respond that my notion of tradition has in large part taken shape through my study of siddha medicine. Because the boundaries and the content of community have been so consistently contested in Tamil-speaking India over the past century, I have tried to forge analytic tools to help illuminate these processes.[40] "Tradition" is one of the notions that I have found particularly useful, and I have tried to "think tradition" through the Tamil materials. To take on this issue more directly than I have thus far: is there a Tamil word that corresponds to "tradition"?

Probably the closest Tamil term that captures some of what I have described as tradition is "*paramparai*" (Sanskrit *paraṃparā*), defined as "1. Uninterrupted series or succession, as of waves; 2. Hereditary succession proceeding from father to son, from guru to disciple, from generation to generation."[41] The word is formed from conjoining

[40] Such contestation has been evident in Tamil-speaking South Asia for over a millenium, in fact, shaped not only by caste differences but also by the recognition of Tamil and Sanskrit as representing different literary and cultural worlds. While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to study these processes of community formation in the *longue durée,* such a study would extend to premodern materials questions about community and identity which are usually only asked about colonial and post-colonial South Asia.

[41] *Tamil Lexicon* (Madras: University of Madras, 1982), 2499.

"*param*" with "*param,*" where "*param*" means "other, another, remote." *Paramparai*, then, carries the sense of transmission between two people, from one to another. This transmission is not so much the dispersal of knowledge among contemporaries as it is the transmission from one generation to the next. The term highlights that knowledge will perish with its possessor if it is not transmitted to some *other*, creating the need for a diachronic community of knowledge, i.e., a tradition.

A derivative form of *paramparai* is "*pāramppariyam.*" As is the case with *paramparai*, the earliest South Asian references to this word are in Sanskrit, *pāraṃparyam*. It is formed in Sanskrit by adding the secondary suffix "–ya" to *paraṃpara*, accompanied by the strengthening (*vṛddhi*) of the initial vowel. This derivative is called a "*bhāvavācaka*," signifying a state of being, an abstract noun based on the primary noun.[42] In Sanskrit, *pāraṃpariyam* thus has the sense of "hereditary succession," "traditional instruction," or simply "tradition." The Tamil *pārampariyam* carries these same meanings: "tradition," "ancestral fame," "great lineage."[43] It generally describes a particular body of knowledge or skill that is passed down through the generations, such as *terukkūttu* temple dramas, siddha medicine, or any other of the "64 arts" of the Tamils. Contemporary *vaidyas* often refer to "traditional experience" (*pāramparyamāṉa aṉupavam*) or speak adverbially to describe something practiced in the manner of prior generations (*paramparaiyāka*). In both cases these terms are used today to indicate not only lineage but the "old ways" and as such are opposed to education and knowledge based on models introduced by the British. In this more recent usage, *paramparai* and *pārampariyam* carry a broader sense than the prior use of particular

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[42] Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland, "*Devavāṇīpraveśikā: An Introduction to the Sanksrit Language* (Berkeley: Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies, 1987), 358.

[43] *Kriyāviṉ Taṟkālat Tamiḻ Akarāti, Tamiḻ-Tamiḻ-Āṅkilam* [Kriya Contemporary Tamil Dictionary, Tamil-Tamil-English] (Madras: Cre-A Publishers, 1992), 712.

lineages of knowledge descended from a founding guru, referring more generally to the "traditions" of knowledge that define a *Tamil* community distinct from other ethnic or national communities. Indeed, the articulation of a single, unified Tamil medical "tradition" was unimaginable before the twentieth century, as the salient units of tradition, in the sense of communities within which knowledge and practices are shared, were hereditary lineages that traced their origins to one of the founding siddhars, whether Agastiyar, Bhogar, or others.

The authority for the knowledge passed in a *paramparai* is perhaps best considered in the terms of Sanskrit philosophical traditions. According to Nyāya thinkers, there are four *pramānas* or means of acquiring valid knowledge. These are *pratyakṣa*, literally, what is "before the eyes;" inference (*anumāna*); analogy (*upamāna*); and spoken authority (*śabda*). It is the last, *śabda*, which best describes the authority of knowledge transmitted in a *paramparai*. *Śabda* is most simply a sound or word, and as a form of authority indicates verbal testimony, the acceptance that what another says is true, even if one cannot determine the truth of that statement through the other three means of knowledge. *Śabda* highlights *orality* as one of the central features of the transmission of knowledge within a *paramparai*. In order to determine the validity of knowledge received through *śabda*, one must determine the reliability of the speaker. Conversely, if this knowledge is considered to be uniquely valuable, the speaker will carefully select students who are worthy of his teaching. The transmission of knowledge in *paramparais* has thus tended to be an esoteric process.

The South Asian conceptualization of *paramparai* as descent is one of lineage and not genealogy. Michel Foucault has pointed out that genealogy indicates origins that are fragmented, not unified. According to genealogy, assertions of unified self or identity mask the heterogeneous sources that compose a self, as the further one traces back one's

genealogy, the more dispersed these sources become.[44] The logic of the *paramparai*, on the other hand, is that of *lineage*, not dispersal. The current practitioner of a *paramparai* asserts a direct connection to an original and true teaching which his particular lineage embodies more faithfully than any of the other lineages that claim the same origin. Unlike genealogical notions of origins, the origins of a *paramparai* are singular and primary, not derived from any other source. The *paramparai* traces itself to a single origin and so also posits a unified identity.

Siddha *vaidyas* generally have held that their medical knowledge, as it is transmitted in *paramparai*s, originated with the siddhars, "perfected" beings. This knowledge must therefore be *preserved* as carefully as possible. The idiom of this transmission is that of the gradual loss of an original perfection, and innovation, strictly speaking, is a digression from truth. In practice, however, *vaidyas* admit two modes of medical knowledge, *kaipākam* and *ceypākam*. *Kaipākam* and *ceypākam* are often considered as together composing the approach of *vaidyas* in formulating medicines. *Kaipākam* is one's practical knowledge of medical preparation, gathered through individual experience, while *ceypākam* is the process of preparation gathered through medical texts or according to theories laid out in these texts. Tension is apparent between the consideration of *kaipākam* as a proper approach to the accumulation of medical knowledge, on the one hand, and the desire to maintain claims to accurately, fully, and exclusively transmit an original teaching on the other. This tension continues to be played out in contemporary discourses on siddha medicine, pitting those who wish to maintain the "purity" of siddha medical knowledge against those who wish to innovate in accordance with "the times."[45]

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[44] See Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

[45] For more on this debate between medical purists and innovators, see Charles Leslie, "Interpretations of Illness: Syncretism in Modern Ayurveda," in *Paths to Asian Medical Knowledge*, ed.

1.3 The Sign of Science

As with many discourses on truth in the modern world, considerations of science come to the fore in South Indian debates over tradition and medicine. I do not use science here in an analytic sense, as my aim is to illuminate the nature of tradition, not science.[46] Following Gyan Prakash, I consider science as a *discursive sign* in South Asian debates over the effectiveness of medical practices and the relevance of tradition. I will examine "science's cultural authority as the legitimating sign of rationality and progress."[47] The "universality" of science is not in the *singular* truth of its method, as asserted by naïve empiricism, but in its *multivalence* as a sign of authority. Like other powerful signs, science is effectively employed to claim authority in a variety of contexts, an authority that has less to do with science as a method and more with its connection to technology, politics, and imperial success. In other words, when Tamils invoke science as a central part of their tradition, they universalize it, not in its method but in its rhetorical link to power and authority.

Science as a sign in Tamil revivalist discourse is generally qualified by cultural and community location – thus siddha *vaidyas* speak of "Western science" and "Tamil science." They bifurcate science, marshalling its authority to legitimate Tamil tradition, and caricaturing science in its Western forms as grossly inadequate. Western science has "disenchanted" the world because it only considers the physicality of things, while Tamil

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Charles Leslie and Allan Young (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1993), 177-208. In his article "Science, Experimentation, and Clinical Practice in Ayurveda" in the same volume, Gananath Obeyesekere studies the innovative "science" of an Ayurvedic practitioner in Sri Lanka.

[46] Although, insofar as science itself is a tradition, perhaps my work will shed some light on particular features of science, such as the scientific community and the transmission of knowledge.

[47] Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 7.

science recognizes the divine in substances, in human individuals, and in the Tamil community. Science is made to play an important yet conflicted role, as it signals the character of one of the primary "others" that is brought into contrast to the Tamil community, and yet it is also placed as a central element of Tamil tradition. Tamil science is ancient and thus *precedes* Western science, and it is also the *culmination* of Western science on account of its superior truth.

At the same time, science as a "rational" (if not empirical) account of natural processes is often invoked to link Western and Tamil traditions, especially in isolating that which is unscientific. Placed at a distance from all science is the other "other" of Tamil revivalist discourse, the Aryan brahman, who is not only ethnically and racially other but also mentally other, his character being that of superstition, illusion, myth and empty ritual. Non-brahman Tamil authors locate superstition pointedly in brahmanic religiosity, most specifically in rituals that require brahmanic mediation. The overriding criteria in distinguishing science from superstition are racial and ethnic, not rational. The "unscientific" nature of brahmanic Hinduism is not that it presupposes a mystical causality *per se*, but that the particular metaphysical causality that it supposes is misguided. After all, when siddha *vaidyas* claim that a perfect and pure Tamil medicine can make the body immortal, or invisible, they assume a mystical causality, even if they base their claims on a deep understanding of natural law.

It is important to note that a term or concept that Tamil non-brahman authors never oppose to science is *paṇpāṭu*, a word which is most often translated as "culture" and which conveys the content of tradition.[48] Indeed, science is celebrated as one of the foremost elements of Tamil *paṇpāṭu*. As Levinas speaks of the "possession" of things as

[48] A recent definition of *paṇpāṭu*: (Tamil) "kuṟippiṭṭa iṭattu makkaḷiṉ paḻakkavaḻakkaṅkaḷum nampikkaikaḷum kalaikaḷum cintaṉaiyai veḷippaṭuttum muṟaikaḷum;" "a specified peoples' customs, habits, beliefs, arts, and ways of expressing thoughts"; (English) "culture." *Kriyāviṉ*, 669.

transforming "other" into self, notions of science that originated outside India are appropriated by defenders of Tamil tradition, represented in their discourse, stereotyped and manipulated. While Western science has articulated a critique of Indian and Tamil traditions, these traditions took possession of science in a traditional space in which they could shape it as they pleased.

1.4 Re-formulating a Tamil Tradition

Pre-modern and contemporary Tamil mythologies describe the siddhars as a group of ascetics who, through their yogic practice, attained supernatural powers and an unmediated connection to the divine. Siddha medical practitioners today trace the origins of their knowledge to these Tamil *yogis*. The writings of the siddhars reject caste, emphasize a direct, internal relation with the divine, and ridicule Hindu rituals. Tamil revivalist writers have emphasized these qualities in celebrating the siddhars in the lineage (*paramparai*) of Tamil tradition, the founders of all its scientific knowledge and the eminent ancestors of the Tamil race.

The siddhars are the ascribed authors of hundreds of texts on a variety of subjects: astrology, yoga, magic, philosophy, and medicine. Among these, it is medicine that has been taken up most fervently as the model for Tamil science and supported by government patronage. *Vaidyas* assert that the siddhars used their extraordinary knowledge to develop medicinal preparations that would preserve the body and prolong life, in this way formulating a "holy science." In their compassion for ordinary people, they transmitted this knowledge in the thousands of palm-leaf manuscripts that are today used to formulate a siddha medical system. This is the legacy claimed by modern siddha practitioners, their "science" founded on equality, devotion to the Tamil people, and knowledge gained through extraordinary means.

Perhaps most striking in contemporary celebrations of siddha medicine is its overwhelming "Tamil-feeling" and "Tamil-devotion."

> The country of the goddess Shakti is none other than our country;[49]
> The language which bestowed the original medicine is none other than our Tamil;
> The Potikai mountain which shines golden is the mountain of our siddhar;[50]
> There is no equal to this celebrated mountain;
> The extremely rare and valuable "muppū kuru" medicine is ours and no other's;
> On this earth, what other medicine can match this, our "kaṟpa" medicine?[51]
> The literature of the celebrated siddhars is none other than our literature;
> And there is no other literature like this in the world.[52]

Tamil celebrations of their nation, language, geography, medicine, literature, and the siddhars overlap in their glory, their uniqueness, their reach back into the ancient past, and their expression of exclusivity. All of these components of Tamil tradition are asserted to be the exclusive, inalienable possessions of an articulated community.

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[49] Shakti is the consort of Shiva. Tamil revivalists emphasize the Tamil loyalties of this divine "family" of Shiva as husband, Shakti as wife, and Murugan or Skanda as son.

[50] This reference is to the siddhar Agastya, the figure who played the biggest role in the redaction and transmission of siddha medical knowledge. Agastya will be discussed at greater length in chapter 4.

[51] "*Muppū kuru*" and "*kaṟpa*" are siddha medical preparations that are said to bestow immortality.

[52] "a̲n̲n̲ai parācakti nāṭeṅkaḷ nāṭē
ātimaruntaḷitta moḻi yeṅkaḷ tamiḻē
po̲n̲n̲oḷirum potikai eṅkaḷ cittar malaiyē
pōṟṟu mimmalaikkiṇai vēṟeṅku milaiyē
pa̲n̲n̲ariya muppū kuruveṅkaḷ maruntē
pārmicai ētu itupōl kaṟpa maruntē.
ma̲n̲n̲u pukaḻccittar nūleṅkaḷ nūlē
mānilattitu pōlē nēlillai mēlē."

Ā. Ca̲n̲mukavēla̲n̲, "Vāḻka Citta Maruttuvam" ["May Siddha Medicine Prosper!"], in *Irantām Ulakattamiḻ Mānāṭu Citta Maruttuva Karuttaraṅku Ciṟappu Malar* [Second World Tamil Conference, Siddha Medicine Seminar Special Souvenir] (Chennai, 1968), 1.

Medicine is perhaps uniquely suited to justify a link between the bodies of a people and particular practices and knowledge. In celebrations of siddha medicine as *the* traditional medicine of each Tamil person, it is also the link between *individual* bodies and the traditional community, a link which excludes affiliation with any other tradition. The relationship between persons, community, and knowledge is complex. It is not as simple as prior Tamil subjects possessing traditional knowledge, as that knowledge itself delineates and constitutes the subject. Tamil tradition is the sign of the signified self, defining the essential nature of the community, which itself would be devoid of character if not for the tradition that describes it. Ironically, then, while tradition is created by a people, it creates them in turn. It is for this reason that the act of reformulating tradition is always more complex than just invention.

The loss of tradition thus represents the loss of the community it creates and describes. Insofar as individuals identify themselves as part of a community, the consciousness that tradition has been lost is accompanied by the perception of a loss of self, and a new tradition brings new conceptions of self and community. When siddha medical practitioners defend their knowledge and practices, they are not only justifying their livelihoods but also arguing that an important part of *themselves* continues to be relevant in the contemporary world. The language of invention overlooks the *inertia* of identity, which is to say that the siddha *vaidya* cannot simply change his identity to become, for example, an allopathic doctor. Not only is the conversion of identity never absolute, but it would also require the time and money for education that most people do not have.

The authority of Tamil notions of history, religion and medicine is justified through an act of identification which links articulations of a Tamil society with reformulations of Tamil tradition. Non-brahman Tamil leaders characterize the relationship between a people, an ethnicity, and a practice as a natural connection of

essences, an organic link between a knowledge and a people. I seek to demonstrate not only that both the articulation of ethnic identity and the characterization of tradition are historically conditioned, but also that tradition and identity are reformulated as *reflections* of each other in such a way that their conjunction appears natural. In other words, when siddha healers situate their practice within a narrative of Tamil identity, they contribute to that narrative which in turn frames and shapes the nature of their practice.

Proponents of a society's cultural identity thus employ a sort of sympathetic magic which creates the impression of an essential and eternal link between a community and its practices. This "mirroring" of traditional knowledge and community identity is, however, a *historical* process – the constituents and character of tradition are constantly transformed by political and social agendas, as are formulations of community identities.[53] The narratives of tradition are myths in the sense offered by Roland Barthes, transforming history into nature and the particular into the eternal.[54] In Tamil non-brahman rhetoric, Tamil identity is made timeless by reifying a concrete essence at the core of each Tamil individual, an essence that is spoken of as eternal, even if it has been temporarily obscured by the accidents of history. This essence is naturalized in connecting it to Tamil soil, constituted with the birth of the Tamil people. Tamil tradition is likewise eternalized and naturalized, described with the characteristics of Tamil essence: rationality, genius, and egalitarianism. A claim for the greatness of one's tradition, then, is a claim for the greatness of one's society, and thereby is a claim for the greatness of each individual that imagines herself to be part of that society.

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[53] The "modernity" of this process of identification does not lie in the act of identification itself, since the linking of knowledge, practices, and vocations to particular communities, usually defined by caste, has taken place in South Asia for thousands of years. What is new in this process is the character of the articulated communities and the way in which knowledge and practice is formulated as both "traditional" and "scientific."

[54] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972 [1957]), 129-141.

1.5 Chapter Outline

The organization of this dissertation is more spatial than chronological, although these two registers overlap to some degree. The chapters are arranged to consider different theoretical aspects of tradition. In a spatial metaphor, they move from exterior to interior. In this way, chapters two and three explore the boundaries of tradition and those "others" who lie outside these boundaries. In particular, chapter two outlines some of the early interactions between British and Indian practitioners, and develops a historical argument for the desire of traditional Indian practitioners to forge a distinct Indian medical tradition. In the third chapter, I examine the nationalistic forces that provoked many Tamil *vaidyas* to further claim a specifically Tamil medical tradition, distinct from other traditional medical practices in India. In both of the chapters, I ask: given the messiness of history, why is it important that traditions be circumscribed by rigid boundaries to create the illusion of a unified, coherent tradition? What danger do those outside the designated tradition present, and what is the discursive potential of demonizing these others? In these chapters and throughout the dissertation, I have tried to shed light both on particular historical processes in nineteenth and especially twentieth century India, and on the nature of traditional authority in the contemporary world.

Chapters four and five deal with the way that traditions are "filled in" with content. I examine the choices that *vaidyas* make when they draw together often disparate elements to constitute the content of their tradition, and which figures and texts they consider to be canonical. In reformulating the content of a siddha medical tradition, considerations of Western and Tamil science have been particularly important. Chapters six and seven develop the ways in which this interiority of tradition is preserved through secrecy and concealment. Indeed, in these last two chapters I explore the most radically interior elements of tradition, elements that are so internal that they are concealed even from those within the tradition.

CHAPTER TWO

THE UNIQUENESS OF TRADITION

One of the primary strategies by which siddha practitioners shield their medical knowledge and techniques from the scrutiny and critique of others, whether biomedical doctors, Aryans, or disloyal Tamils, has been the location of siddha medicine as a component of a unique Tamil tradition.[1] It is under the mantle of tradition that Tamils have asserted the coherent and unchanging character of the Tamil people, pointing to an essence that is manifested in the products of an ancient and unified community. In arguing that the purity of their traditions must be recaptured and preserved, cultural revivalists take on the unenviable task of sealing the porous boundaries of tradition, boundaries which are themselves variously conceived. They celebrate certain products as central to a particular tradition, and consider others to be marginal, or foreign imports, choices that are often at odds with considerations of geography or language. For example, many siddha *vaidyas* today characterize Ayurveda as a foreign medical practice, inappropriate to the Tamil people, even though it has been practiced in Tamil Nadu by Tamil-speaking people for centuries.

Since the early decades of the nineteenth century, one of the major issues concerning indigenous medical knowledge in India has been whether it should be treated as unique and self-sufficient, or whether it should be supplemented by, or integrated into, biomedical learning. Biomedical doctors have argued for a singular medical efficacy, dismissing the possibility of an enduring medical landscape whose contours are

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[1] My thinking on the issue of the relativity of traditions and rationality has been informed by the work of Alasdair Macintyre. See *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988); *Three Rival Versions*; and *After Virtue*.

constituted by theories and practices of both biomedicine and indigenous medicine. These doctors have faith in a self-regulating notion of efficacy, assuming that the rationality of their own medicine is indisputable and therefore will, in accordance to a historical teleology of progress defined by the absorption of the traditional other, gradually effect the desiccation and ultimate demise of indigenous medicine.[2]

The views of indigenous medical practitioners have been varied. Some have called for the synthesis of Western and indigenous knowledge into a singular and universal medicine. The College of Integrated Medicine was founded in Madras in 1947, the year of Indian independence, with this goal of integrating biomedical and indigenous medical knowledge. Other *vaidyas* have argued that given the disparities of power inherent in colonial and post-colonial processes, traditional knowledge suffers neglect in the hands of the modern state and so is in peril of disintegration. These latter practitioners commonly delineate a realm of traditional activity with the defining feature of autonomy, in which they feel free to formulate their own rules and insist on the relativity of truth vis-à-vis external critiques.[3]

In the following pages I will examine the positions taken by these promoters of pure tradition. In their opposition to biomedicine, traditional medical practitioners were unified in their defense, while with Indian independence, the distinguishing features of three traditional medical practices, roughly segregated along linguistic lines – Tamil (siddha), Sanskrit (ayurveda), and Arabic and Urdu (unani) – became more important in defining medical traditions. In this chapter I will focus on their unified response to

[2] Of course, the challenges that biomedicine has posed to traditional techniques did not disappear with Indian independence, but have significantly increased: the reach of education in the Western sciences and of biomedical institutions is far greater today than in colonial times.

[3] This is not to say that these practitioners did not make the further move of insisting on the universality of their knowledge. Like a one-way mirror, they affirmed their impunity from the external gaze, while celebrating the transparency of the errors of biomedicine. I will discuss this process in a later section.

biomedicine, and in subsequent chapters I will explore the ways in which siddha practitioners have argued for a unique and independent medical tradition.

2.1 Tradition and History

The view contra Weber that traditional action is not simply imitation but often involves deliberate choice highlights the innovation of tradition. This is simply to say that traditions have histories. In 19th and 20th century India, "tradition" emerged as a realm of Indian knowledge and practice that was opposed to Western science – indeed, the dichotomy of science and tradition is a historical one. While much has been made of the way colonial authorities employed this dichotomy to relegate the knowledge of their imperial subjects to the past, less attention has been given to how this notion of tradition has also served as an autonomous space over which Indians could exert control. The use to which *vaidyas* have employed this distinction in the past two centuries suggests not that they appropriated an imperial category and used it against their colonial masters, but that the very dichotomy itself emerged from a cultural encounter that those on each side of the conflict used to their advantage.

The sort of historical emergence that I suggest is not one of first origin. As Michel Foucault has pointed out, the attempt to establish specific origins is "an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities...."[4] Specific origins imply also specific ends, and so are oriented by a teleology of history, and it is just such implicit teleologies, of degeneration from a utopian past, or as progression towards a final rationality, that I seek to avoid as frameworks for analysis. Against revivalist notions that both the Tamil people and Tamil tradition are autochthonous and perfectly unified, my history asserts a genealogy, in Foucault's sense: "The search for descent is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs

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[4] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 78.

what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself."[5] As genealogies reveal the dispersed nature of origins, a genealogical approach to history likewise reveals "the heterogeneous systems which, masked by the self, inhibit the formation of any form of identity."[6]

When I start my narrative in 1822, then, I do not claim to locate the origin of Tamil assertions of unique identity, much less the origin of a particular function of the notion of tradition, but to suggest the beginnings of a historical "emergence." In interrogating contemporary assertions of unique and bounded traditional medical systems in their historical, colonial and national contexts, I offer a way of understanding how one society, confronted with domination, has developed strategies in its struggle to counter a dominating force that claims a monopoly. This chapter, then, suggests in part an answer to the question: What motivates assertions of community boundaries?

2.2 *Western Science and the Critique of Indigenous Medicine*

It was not without reason that siddha *vaidyas*, like ayurveda and unani practitioners, have felt the need to circumscribe and withdraw into an autonomous realm which they called "tradition." The history of their interaction with "allopathy," a word used in India to denote medical practices and theories introduced by the British, reflects the power differential of British imperialism. The debates that arose among biomedical and traditional medical practitioners about the proper way to deal with this confrontation of medicines provide an entrée not only into the controversy about the overlap or uniqueness of these systems of knowledge and practice; not only into issues that arise with the interaction of forms of knowledge that have different histories and that are part

[5] Ibid., 82.

[6] Ibid., 95.

of a contemporary politics of culture; but also into the institutional effects of these disputes, in the establishment of medical colleges, hospitals, and a system of registration of all medical practitioners.

The first Western-style school to teach a course in indigenous medicine was the Native Medical Institution, founded in Calcutta in June, 1822. Beginning in 1813, the British in India had dedicated 100,000 rupees per year to the education of Indians. Influenced by the researches of the Asiatic Society of Bengal into Indian literature and sciences, the Calcutta Medical Board proposed to use part of this funding to establish a new school in which ayurveda and Western medicine would be taught side by side.[7] The purpose of the new school was to better train Indians to contribute to the medical needs of the East India Company, most commonly as assistants in military battalions.[8] These assistants, called 'native doctors,' served an eclectic range of tasks, some of which required basic knowledge of clinical medical techniques. The Native Medical Institution was founded not only to provide formal training for these Indian doctors; those sitting on the Medical Board were confident that the conjoint presentation of allopathy and indigenous medicine would instill the realization in Indians of the "superiority of the new race."[9]

Classes in the school were taught in Hindustani and Urdu which required an ongoing project of translations of English and Sanskrit medical texts. For the Western side of the course, physiology, anatomy and pharmacology were taught in the first year, and the last two years consisted of instruction in clinical training in Calcutta hospitals.

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[7] *Report of the Committee to Assess and Evaluate the Present Status of Ayurvedic System of Medicine* (Delhi: Government of India, Ministry of Health, 1958), 25; Anil Kumar, 19; Brahmananda Gupta, "Indigenous Medicine in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Bengal," in Leslie, *Asian Medical Systems*, 368-78.

[8] Anil Kumar, 18-19.

[9] Quoted in ibid., 19.

Students were taught ayurvedic texts and techniques at the Calcutta Sanskrit College, while the Calcutta Madrasa taught courses in unani, the Islamic system of medicine.[10] At this time, then, indigenous medicine was already grouped with literature and the arts, and so was considered to be a part of local tradition distinct from universal science. In its earliest English usage, "science" was conjoined with notions of art. Only later in the 17th and 18th centuries did science come to represent disciplines of knowledge that were opposed to art.[11] The institutional divisions in the Native Medical Institution reflect these distinctions, as non-European medical traditions were taught alongside literature and the arts. The colonial administrators of the school made no attempt to synthesize or integrate Indian and British theories and practices, but rather the curriculum consisted of the conjoint teaching of disparate systems.

The school was run with much controversy for just over a decade. The problem was not whether Indians were capable of learning Western sciences – after all, it was only a decade later that Thomas Macaulay was to make his infamous declaration that the British intended to shape "a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect."[12] More significant was the opinion of the British that Indian techniques were not effective. It was for this reason that the institution was finally dissolved in 1835 on the recommendation of a government committee report which asserted that theories of science were incompatible with the principles of Ayurveda.[13]

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[10] Anil Kumar, 20.

[11] Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 278.

[12] Thomas Macaulay, "Minute on Education," in *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. 2, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 49.

[13] See the *Report of the Committee to Assess and Evaluate the Present Status of Ayurvedic System of Medicine*, 25.

Another form of "incompatibility" that was often cited involved the teaching of European science in the Indian vernaculars. The problem with the vernacular languages, it seems, was not just their impoverished medical lexicon, but also their internal, irreparable dispersion and inconsistency. Thus, C.E. Trevelyan, in 1830, wrote:

> Our object ought not to be by any means of translations, to make at the best an imperfect graft of the tree of knowledge on a trunk, the heterogeneity of which will not admit of its flourishing upon it, but by the introduction of our own literature and the instruction of the natives in it from their earliest youth we ought to plant a young and flourishing tree which with the encouragement it is in the power of government to afford it, will shoot out and spread its branches far and wide while the trunk of the old system will be left to a natural and neglected decay. [14]

In 1833, a group of administrators led by Alexander Duff, the head of the Scottish Free Church Institution, questioned the capability of South Asian languages to represent scientific notions and so also dismissed the utility of the Native Medical Institution. Instead, they advocated

> a knowledge of the English language which we consider as a *sine quanon*, because that language contains within itself the circle of all the sciences and incalculable wealth of printed works and illustrations, circumstances which give it obvious advantage over oriental languages in which are only to be found the crudest elements of science or the most irrational substitutes for it.[15]

When he became principal of the Native Medical Institution in 1830, John Tytler believed that South Asian indigenous medicine was outdated but contained a grain of truth, and that the vernacular languages of India were capable of representing the notions of Western science.[16] However, when he set out to translate European textbooks into Arabic, he found sufficient counterparts lacking. In a change of heart that was to augur

[14] Quoted in Deepak Kumar, *Science and the Raj, 1857-1905* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 48.

[15] Anil Kumar, 22.

[16] Ibid., 21.

the end of the school, Tytler renounced his former stance on the possibility of translations and pointed to the difficulty of convincing Indians to reject the "crude fallacies" of their medicine.[17]

When the school was closed, formal teaching in ayurveda was also discontinued. The Calcutta Medical College was founded to continue the education of native doctors. Training would be carried out in English and would be exclusively dedicated to clinical medicine, as students would "learn the principles and practice of medical science in strict accordance with the mode adopted in Europe."[18] The dissolution of the Native Medical Institution is seen by many to have been a watershed in the victory of "Anglicists" over "Orientalists" in the consideration of the proper relationship of Western and South Asian practices.[19] While this was not a decisive victory, it did reflect the prevalent, dismissive attitude of both the British and Indians trained in allopathic medicine towards indigenous practices and theories, exemplified by James Mill in his 1824 objection to the Native Medical Institution. "With respect to sciences it was worse than a waste of time to employ persons to teach and learn them in the state in which they were found in the Oriental books. Our great aim should be not to teach Hindu learning, but sound learning."[20]

It is no coincidence that the dissolution of the Native Medical Institution and Thomas Macaulay's "Minute on Education" both occurred in 1835. Macaulay set the course of government patronage of Indian education for the next century. He dismissed vernacular scientific education, asserting the agreement of "all parties" that "the dialects

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[17] Deepak Kumar, 52-53.

[18] Ibid., 53.

[19] David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*, 13. Anil Kumar, 22; Brahmananda Gupta, 370; Deepak Kumar, 48-49.

[20] Quoted in Anil Kumar, 20.

commonly spoken among the natives of this part of India contain neither literary nor scientific information, and are, moreover, so poor and rude that, until they are enriched from some other quarter, it will not be easy to translate any valuable work into them."[21] He admitted the poetic excellence of Sanskrit and Arabic, but asserted that "when we pass from works of imagination to works in which facts are recorded, and general principles investigated, the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable."[22] The classical languages may be appropriate for works of fiction, but their capabilities do not extend to the representation of "facts," science, or truth.

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to address in a precise way the criteria by which British authorities felt justified in their critique of indigenous medical knowledge. One event, however, that clearly suggests some features of these criteria occurred less than a year after the Native Medical Institution had been replaced by the Calcutta Medical College. On January 10, 1836, Pandit Madhusudan Gupta performed a dissection of the human body.[23] Gupta had been appointed to the faculty of the teaching staff at the Medical College in March, 1835, and subsequently became superintendent of the college in 1843.[24] Because of prevalent Hindu attitudes towards the sanctity and polluting capacity of the human body, students of the Native Medical Institution did not dissect people but animals.[25] This lack of practical anatomy was cited in the report that led to the dissolution of the school, which argued that without practical anatomy, the education received at the Institution was incomplete.[26]

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[21] Macaulay, 44.

[22] Ibid., 45.

[23] David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body,* 58.

[24] Anil Kumar, 26.

[25] Ibid., 20.

[26] Ibid., 22.

Michel Foucault has pointed to a similar "breakthrough" in the study of anatomy in Europe, when, in the 18th century, medicine would "gain access to that which founded it scientifically only by circumventing, slowly and prudently, one major obstacle, the opposition of religion, morality, and stubborn prejudice to the opening up of corpses."[27] With the equation of seeing and knowing, and the opening of anatomy to the gaze of the researcher, observations that were not based on the visible were discounted as superstition. The critique of indigenous medicine was that the principles on which they are founded, such as the three humours, hot and cold foods and diseases, and pulse reading, are based on cultural considerations devoid of any visible component. To be seen is to be known, and the invisible was the stuff of religion, not science. With an Indian dissection of the human body, the colonial project of creating a class of Anglicized Indians came one step closer to realization.

2.3 Colonial Reconsiderations of Indigenous Medicine

After the close of the Calcutta Native Medical Institution in 1835, the teaching of indigenous medicine in classrooms, and official government research into indigenous practice, was to wait eight decades before being taken up again. On November 26, 1915, A. S. Krishna Rao proposed a resolution in the Legislative Council of the Madras Presidency, that the Madras government "direct a research and investigation of the Ayurvedic system of medicine, with a view to improve and encourage that system."[28] As of 1914, only two dispensaries of indigenous medicines were receiving government aid, and even these two had been denied aid in 1915. Rao's goal was to convince the government to consider indigenous medicines worthy of public funding.

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[27] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 124.

[28] Gary J. Hausman, "Siddhars, Alchemy and the Abyss of Tradition: 'Traditional' Tamil Medical Knowledge in 'Modern' Practice" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1996), 116.

Those with the most power to distribute public money in the Madras presidency were initially resistant to fund any research into indigenous medicines. A. G. Cardew, Minister for Medicine, objected to the proposal, simply saying that the government did not have the funds for such encouragement.[29] Dr. T. M. Nayar proposed an amendment of the resolution, that the words "ayurvedic system of medicine" be replaced with "the pharmacological action of Indian drugs."[30] This substitution is indicative of an attitude that while the theories behind indigenous medicine, insofar as they are in opposition to science, must be wrong, indigenous medical practitioners might have stumbled upon some useful medicines in their centuries of experimentation. This is consistent with Cardew's opinion on Ayurveda, expressed a three years later in his opposition to the founding of a college of indigenous medicine, in May, 1918: "No doubt, there may be useful remedies among the drugs employed in old books but that isn't a science of medicine; it is merely a detail of dosage."[31]

It was Minister for Cardew who made the final revision to the resolution, requesting that the words "with a view to encourage and improve the systems [of indigenous medicine]" be deleted. The three forms of the resolution, then, were that the Madras government:

> 1. direct a research and investigation of the Ayurvedic system of medicine, with a view to improve and encourage that system.
> 2. direct a research and investigation of the pharmacological action of Indian drugs, with a view to improve and encourage [the indigenous] system.
> 3. direct a research and investigation of the pharmacological action of Indian drugs.

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[29] Ibid., 117.

[30] Ibid., 119.

[31] Cited in ibid., 159.

It was the third resolution that was passed in 1917, having moved far from its initial goal of encouragement, to an investigation of indigenous drugs in order to supplement and improve the *biomedical* system. Later, after Dr. M. C. Koman was appointed chairman of this committee and began to carry out his investigations, the new Surgeon General G. G. Giffard restated more baldly that the goal of this investigation was to supplement the biomedical pharmacopoeia.

> Thousands of drugs exist in India which are of the same natural order or class as the drugs which have come into our pharmacopoeia. I mean the British pharmacopoeia which we call *the* pharmacopoeia. . . . Dr. Koman is making an inquiry and if he is able personally to induce India doctors to give him any assistance, we may find something useful. The great profession of Medicine never shuts its eyes to anything useful.[32]

What might be useful, however, is the material wealth that can be integrated into *the* (British) pharmacopoeia. Giffard expresses faith in the physical material of India but not in the knowledge produced and recorded in the "unintelligible" Sanskrit writings, a language of "priestly mysticism" and so clearly unsuited for scientific truths.[33] The nature of this inquiry was not lost on the local vernacular press. The *Andhrapatrika*, a Telegu paper, observed that "the appointment of Dr. Koman to make a research regarding these systems was not made with the object of improving them but for incorporating in the English pharmacopoeia the efficacious drugs which are used therein."[34] The colonial plundering of native material wealth with a rejection of indigenous forms of knowledge was manifested in many arenas of activity, and medicine was no exception.

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[32] Cited in ibid., 165.

[33] Ibid., 165.

[34] Ibid., 155.

2.4 *The Response of Indigenous Practitioners to the Koman Report: Colonial Misunderstandings*

Dr. Koman submitted three reports to the government of the Madras Presidency from 1918 to 1920.[35] In these reports, he considered various ingredients used for indigenous medicines and tested their effects on patients according to the standards of Western science. What I want to focus on here, however, is not the Koman Report itself, but the response to this report by The Dravida Vaidya Mandal and the Madras Ayurveda Society. The Dravida Vaidya Mandal represented primarily Tamil *vaidyas* of South India, while the Ayurveda Society represented Sanskrit *vaidyas*. Note that these two are united in responding to the common challenge of biomedicine, whereas later I will examine the ways in which Tamil practitioners attacked ayurveda as foreign medicine.

Their *Reply to the Report on the Investigation into the Indigenous Drugs* was released in 1921. A response of this sort was necessary, these practitioners argued, because the "learned doctor, appointed by the Government, had thoroughly failed to understand the indigenous systems and had grievously erred on many vital points."[36] Noting that Koman judged the effect of some indigenous medicines as "beneficial," the *vaidyas* continue that their protest "is not against what is declared as 'beneficial' etc., but against the mortal wound inflicted on the vital parts."[37] These "vital parts" are indigenous theories of the body and health, the parts of medicine that were rejected as medieval by colonial health administrators, a rejection which was at the same time the rationale for the particular focus of Dr. Koman's investigation of indigenous drugs, not theories.

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[35] *Report of the Special Committee Appointed by the Joint Board of the Dravida Vaidya Mandal and The Madras Ayurveda Sabha in Reply to The Report on the Investigation into the Indigenous Drugs* (Srirangam, South India: Sri Vani Vilas Press, 1921), 2.

[36] Ibid., 2-3.

[37] Ibid., 7-8.

In his report, Dr. Koman asserts that "From what I have seen the science of Hindu medicine is still sunk in a state of empirical obscurity."[38] The *vaidyas* interpret this rightly, I think: "To them [Koman, biomedical doctors, colonial authorities] the use of drugs in Ayurveda is a matter of accidence [sic] which the learned doctor was kind enough to say as 'empirical'."[39] Koman's final conclusion is that "I am of the opinion that there is very little if anything for us to learn from the methods of treatment followed by the vaidyans and hakims [unani practitioners]."[40] The *vaidyas* admonish Dr. Koman and the project in general for only being concerned with the properties of indigenous drugs while failing "to grasp the intricate principles of the indigenous systems."[41] For example, in his examination of the ayurvedic medicine for syphilis called "Poornachandrodayam,"[42] Dr. Koman remarks that "the action of Poornachandrodayam is very slow and does not compare favourably with that of Salvarsan."[43] The *vaidyas* argue that Dr. Koman is influenced here by his biomedical background, which values quick, temporary benefits over slower but permanent results. They counter that Dr. Koman

> carefully omits to mention that the treatment by Salvarsan does not thoroughly eradicate the disease from the body. Numerous cases of syphilis given up as hopeless by the allopathic physicians have been tried by the *vaidyas* with good and satisfactory results. The learned doctor has

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[38] Ibid., 20.

[39] Ibid., 95.

[40] Ibid., 66.

[41] Ibid., 4.

[42] T.V. Sambasivam Pillai defines the Tamilized *pūraṇacantirōdayam* as "an infallible Ayurvedic medicine capable of curing many ailments and promoting secretion of semen. It is a Siddha Medicine, too. It contains gold, sulphur and mercury." T.V. Sambasivam Pillai, *Tamil-English Dictionary of Medicine, Chemistry, Botany and Allied Sciences (Based on Indian Medical Science)*, vol. 5 (Madras: Government of Tamil Nadu, 1994), 550.

[43] *Report of the Special Committee Appointed by the Joint Board of the Dravida Vaidya Mandal and The Madras Ayurveda Sabha*, 72.

> yet to learn why the action of Poornachandrodaya, though slow, is yet permanent while that of Salvarsan is transitory.[44]

The *vaidyas* are making a claim that the proper use of their medicines can only be understood within the context of indigenous theory. Medicines cannot be extracted from the context of local knowledge and integrated into a foreign system of knowledge without radically changing the nature of the medical applications. In broader terms, the *vaidyas* argue for the unalienable coherence of tradition – a piecemeal plundering of the system will not be successful. Western medicine cannot benefit from indigenous medicines without first understanding indigenous theory.

There is no objective understanding of the properties of medicines outside of particular traditions, the *vaidyas* argue: what appears to be "slow" from the point of view of British medicine is considered "effective" from the Indian standpoint. Dr. Koman has dismissed the effectiveness of Poornachandrodayam because he has failed to understand the Ayurvedic theory behind this medical formulation.

> Ayurveda has recognized that there are seven important poisonous sheaths covering mercury which are highly injurious to the body and to remove them it has prescribed seven processes of purification as Sodhana, Jarana, Utthapana etc. By these processes mercury is made absolutely harmless. The British Pharmacopoea is quite a stranger to these methods...[45]

When Koman asserted that there is little for "us" to learn from the *vaidyas* and hakims, his frame of reference was that of Western medicine. The *vaidyas* counter that Koman, who here represents all practitioners of biomedicine, cannot pass such a judgment before he fully understands indigenous theories. Furthermore, this lack of understanding prevents Koman from successfully completing even the more circumscribed task of testing the effectiveness of indigenous drugs, as the action of the drugs cannot be properly understood outside the context of indigenous theory. The biomedical project of

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[44] Ibid., 79-80.

[45] Ibid., 80.

incorporating indigenous drugs while rejecting indigenous theory is essentially flawed, the *vaidyas* argue.

Just as most doctors of Western medicine denied that South Asian languages were capable of representing Western science, likewise the *vaidyas* trace Koman's misunderstanding to his use of translations and the fact that he "ridiculed" indigenous terminology, terminology which would have "greatly helped him to understand why one medicine acts either slowly or quickly or in a particular way in a disease."[46] As proof of Koman's misunderstanding of the application of the preparation called "Vasaka" in Sanskrit, the *vaidyas* quote a canonical Ayurvedic text by Vagbhata: "वृषो जयत्यस्रपित्तं स ह्यस्य परमौषधम्," or "Vrisha (Vasaka) conquers haemorrhage for it is an excellent specific for it."[47] The insertion of the Devanagari script into a polemic in English marks the disjunction between different languages and so, as synecdoche, the disjunction between different worlds of understanding. This abrupt change of script highlights that those without a deep understanding of South Asian scripts, languages, and texts cannot understand South Asian traditions well enough to offer an informed critique.

While for Western doctors the impossibility of translation was an indication of the poverty of indigenous language and tradition, for these *vaidyas* the boundary of communication is a rampart against the attacks of an arrogant foe. "So long as the properties of drugs are not known, to the practitioners of the Western system, in the terminology of Ayurveda also, so long will it have to be reckoned that all have not been 'already known' and that much is left which has to be known."[48] Indigenous medicine can only be known, and therefore can only be critically scrutinized, by those with a knowledge of South Asian languages.

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[46] Ibid., 9-10.

[47] Ibid., 12.

[48] Ibid., 27-28.

2.5 Making Space for Tradition: Indian Orientalism

The *vaidyas*' strategy of asserting a linguistic sphere different from English as well as a unique system of theory is part of their project to carve out an independent space for their practice in response to the universalist claims of an ascendant Anglicism. If the claims of the British are correct – if truth is one, and it is in English, or if indeed the British pharmacopoeia is *the* pharmacopoeia – then those who practice Indian medicine cannot sustain the continued relevance of their knowledge. In addition to linguistic and theoretic uniqueness, *vaidyas* have also drawn on Orientalist idioms in asserting that their traditions are in principle impervious to British critique.

We have seen one case in which indigenous practitioners defend the slow action of their drugs in response to Koman's critiques. They make this point often, for example with reference to a medicine called "Salmali" in Sanskrit or "Mullilavamaram" in Tamil: "this slow action of the indigenous drugs with permanent results is highly to be preferred to the quick action of the drugs of the British pharmacopea with fleeting results."[49] This claim that British medicine brings quick but only temporary relief, while the indigenous systems bring slower but permanent cures, is common throughout siddha and ayurvedic literature. These generalizations are best understood in the context of a prevalent attitude of Indian medical practitioners, derived from Orientalist scholarship, according to which the primary successes of the West are in the superficial material realm, whereas the mystical East can claim a more secure understanding of the true, metaphysical essence of things.

For many, such a difference in expertise serves as the basis for the synthesis of medical systems. S. Nijalingappa, the Chief Minister of Mysore, writes:

> While scientists have developed several branches of science to give man more of comforts and less of labour, they have not yet been able to

[49] Ibid., 9.

> understand adequately the extremely complex nature of man and his make up. I think it is time that men of medical science should cast off prejudice or bias towards one system of medicine or the other and with an open mind learn from all systems and above all endeavour to know more of man – his heredity, his mental, spiritual and mystical potentialities – apart from what little of him is revealed by the application of the several branches of science such as physiology, pathology, psychology, etc.[50]

While for some the juxtaposition of a materialistic Western science and traditional knowledge of the intangible person offers the possibility for peaceful coexistence or integration of medical systems, for others this difference offers a space in which to assert the unique character, and often the superiority, of traditional medicine.

Most siddha practitioners hold to a view that posits both physical and non-physical matter and forces in the cosmos. The siddhars "had divided everything in the cosmos [*aṇṭam*] and the body [*piṇṭam*] into two classes: those physical objects that are composed of the five elements [*aimpūtaṅkaḷ*] and those subtle objects."[51] Likewise, drawing from yogic views of the body, siddha scholars and practitioners distinguish a gross, physical body from an invisible, subtle body.

> There are two kinds of structures in humans – one is the external structure of the body, and the other is the internal form. The former is conventionally known as the corporeal body (*ittūla uṭampu*)[Sanskrit "sthūla" – bulky, corpulent] and the other is called the subtle body (*cūkkuma uṭampu*)[Sanskrit "sūkṣma" – minute, subtle]. Therefore, if we know the structure of the internal body, then we will easily know, by means of the root substance (*mūlavastu*), human diseases and their remedies.[52]

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[50] S. Nijalangappa, "Preface," in *The Government College of Integrated Medicine Decennial Souvenir* (Chennai, 1957).

[51] "aṇṭattilum piṉṭatillumuḷḷa [sic] aimpūtaṅkaḷāṉa aṉaittupporuṭkaḷaiyum parupporuḷ (Physical Objects) eṉavum nuṇporuḷ (Subtle Objects) eṉavum iru tokutikaḷākap pakuttuḷḷaṉar." *Tamiḻ (Citta) Maruttuvak Kōṭpāṭu* [The Doctrine of Tamil (Siddha) Medicine] (Chennai: The Department of Indian Medicine and Homeopathy), 8.

[52] "maṉitaṉiṭattil iraṇṭuvita amaippiṉ kūṟupāṭukaḷ uṇṭu – atil oṉṟu, tēkattiṉ veḷi amaippuk kūṟupāṭu, maṟṟoṉṟō, uḷḷamaippuk kūṟupāṭu. muṉ solliya oṉṟutāṉ ittūla uṭampai aṉucarittatu. maṟṟoṉṟu cūkkuma uṭampai oṭṭiyatākum. ākavē, nām uḷḷuṭampiṉ kūṟupāṭṭai aṟintuviṭṭāl, mūlavastu mūliyamāy maṉitaṉukkuḷḷa nōyaiyum ataṟkuṇṭāṉa nivarttiyaiyum, eḷitil terintukkoḷḷalām." T.V. Sambasivam Pillai, *Tamil-English Dictionary*, 2110.

Insight into this subtle side of things requires something which the technologies of modern science cannot provide: a "mental eye,"[53] "wisdom eye,"[54] or "inner eye."[55]

> Man has, according to Siddha science, physical body as well as a subtle body. Physical body is visible to our eyes..., but the subtle body is not visible to our naked eyes.... A physician or physiologist is concerned with the gross physical body. He is not aware of the subtle life force of the gross physical body which is not visible to his external sense organs. One who has developed his inner vision knows the subtle life force in him.[56]

The contrast of this inner eye and the knowledge it yields, and the instruments and knowledge available to Western medicine, is common in the literature on siddha and ayurveda medicines. The development of this inner eye is accomplished through South Asian religious practices of yoga and asceticism, and is most commonly envisioned as a third eye of Shiva or of other accomplished ascetics such as the siddhars. As such, indigenous medical practitioners argue, it is an ancient and unique possession of South Asian traditions.

> According to modern medicine, if one wants to see what is inside a body, one needs to dissect a corpse. Siddha practitioners, thousands of years ago, had clear knowledge about the body, and knew of all the body's internal organs with the mental eye.... Therefore, if one dissects and observes [a body] in this [modern] way, one cannot see the true structure [of the body]. With the method of new medicine, it is not possible to discover the empty space in our bodies.[57]

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[53] "maṉakkaṇ." Irā. Kastūri, "Citta Maruttuvam" ["Siddha Medicine"], in *Tiruvaḷḷuvar Īrāyiramāṇṭu Niṟaivu Viḻā Malar* [Commemorative Volume of the Celebration of Two Thousand Years of Tiruvalluvar] (Kōvai, Tamiḻ Nāṭu: Pāvēntar pāratitācaṉ Maṉṟam, 1970), 31.

[54] A. Shanmuga Velan, *Siddhar's Science of Longevity and Kalpa Medicine of India* (Madras: Sakthi Nilayam, 1963), 38.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid.

[57] "taṟkāla muṟaiyiṉpaṭi oru uṭalil eṉṉa irukkiṟatu eṉpataik kāṇavēṇṭumāṉāl, oru piṇattai aṟuttup pārttuttāṉ kāṇavēṇṭi irukkiṟatu. citta maruttuvam pala āyira āṇṭukaḷukku muṉpē uṭalaip paṟṟiya teḷivāṉa aṟivai uṭalil uḷḷa uḷ uṟappukkaḷ yāvaṟṟaiyum maṉakkaṇṇāl kaṇṭu... ākavē annilaiyil aṟuttup pārttāl teḷivāṉa uṇmai amaippaip parka muṭiyātu. namatu uṭalil meṟṟiṭam (ākācam) eṉpatu eṅkirukkiṟatu eṉpataip putiya maruttuva muṟaiyil iṉṉum kaṇṭupiṭikka muṭiyavillai." Irā. Kastūri, 31.

Biomedical doctors insist on the visibility (via two eyes) of knowledge and so they overlook the metaphysical composition of our bodies. They misunderstand both the body and disease as being wholly physical, and so their remedies do not address the essence of disease rooted in the subtle body. It is this "empty space" of the body that is only perceptible by means of traditional Indian methods, a bodily space that is likewise an epistemological space, an aspect of truth over which Indian tradition claims a monopoly of expertise.

This critique of biomedicine is at the same time a critique of the Western scientific method, which demands a link between visibility and knowledge. "The ancient philosophers of Siddha School knew more about the powers that move the world and of communications of thought at a distance without the employment of any visible means which is thought current. Modern Western Medicine knows only the dead body of man and not the living image in him presented by Nature.... and so, modern science knows more about the superficiality of things...."[58] Modern science, and therefore biomedical knowledge and medicines, are necessarily limited to the material realm, rendering their effects superficial and temporary, as they are incapable of penetrating the non-visible essence of things. When indigenous practitioners oppose the speedy but superficial remedies of biomedicine to their own method, which brings slower but permanent results, it is this view of the body that they have in mind. In asserting that Western and Indian knowledge are radically different in their essential nature, *vaidyas* argue for an incommensurable distance between medical traditions that critique cannot traverse.

While some indigenous practitioners argue for a synthesis of the material knowledge of the West with the metaphysical knowledge of India, others deny that these realms can be separated, holding that material knowledge without metaphysical

[58] T.V. Sambasivam Pillai, *Tamil-English Dictionary,* 2106.

understanding is flawed. The sophistication of India in matters of imagination and religion was not gained at the expense of a knowledge of material forces, as Orientalist logic asserts, but rather has enabled a deeper knowledge of the body and the forces of nature than govern medical processes. The space that traditional practitioners carve out for themselves therefore lies *apart* from that claimed by Western medicine (metaphysical vs. physical knowledge), a space which can be mastered through meditation and self-denial, not through the mechanical apparati of the sort that the British so impressively possessed. More importantly, this space lies *below* that of biomedicine, not in a hierarchical sense of being inferior, but rather in indicating that traditional knowledge describes the *root* of things.

2.6 An Organic Correspondence: Indian People and Indian Medicine

Another way that traditional practitioners have argued for their medical priority to heal Indians has been to assert a link between the Indian climate, culture and language, on the one hand, and the bodily constitution of the Indian people on the other. A "Committee convened under the direction of the President of the Eastern Medical Association of Southern India, Madras," a guild of unani practitioners, invoking natural law rather than divine design, argue that local environments have all the material necessary to remedy diseases that prevail in a particular region. "It is one of the laws of nature that wherever we find a disease, in its very neighbourhood we do find cure for the same disease; that is to say, for the diseases prevailing on India, we need not go beyond India to procure medicines to efficiently cure the disease, for there is in Indian itself plenty of medicines to counteract the prevailing diseases."[59] Medical products of the land from which a people emerged are uniquely suited to cure the ailments of that people, an argument against the importing of foreign medicines.

[59] *The Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine, Part 2* (Madras, 1923), 234.

The environmental correspondence is not limited to local medicines and local diseases, but extends to local people as well. This same committee of unani practitioners assert: "The 'Ayurvedic' and 'Unani' systems of medicine are unquestionably and beyond a shadow of doubt more useful for this country than the so-called 'Allopathic' or the 'Western' principles of medical treatment, as they are operated on Indians by Indians through the media of Indian productions of herbs and drugs, on the efficacy of which climatic influences have not a little to partake of."[60] In his opening address of the 1935 "Exhibition of Indian Medicines," the siddha practitioner A.J. Pandian declares that the founders of Indian medical knowledge, the "Saints, Rishis or Angels," developed "the subtle treatment that has been prescribed for the very many diseases of our land, particularly suited to the physical and mental constitution of our people…"[61] This conjunction of Indian bodies and Indian medicine is described as neither accidental nor conventional, but historical and, even more importantly, essential, as the essences of each have a single origin and evolved in a symbiotic relationship.

The linking of environment, disease, medicines, and bodies has a certain material logic which asserts that the local community are autochthons. *Vaidyas* extend these organic links to inorganic processes such as "culture" and "civilization." Thus, the Qaumi Report [on Unani Medicine], released on April 4, 1917, characterized "indigenous medical practice whether Unani (Grecian) or Ayurvedic" as "an essential part of our civilization."[62] Four years later, the siddha practitioner Ponnuswami Pillai writes from Kumbakonam.

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[60] Ibid., 232.

[61] A. J. Pandian, "Exhibition of Indian Medicines: Opening Address," in *The Journal of Indian Medicine* 1, no. 1 (April, 1935), 32.

[62] Hausman, 126.

> Just as each country naturally has a particular type of civilization, education, and religious practices, likewise medicine is appropriate for each country's natural environment, climate, and culture. India's own medical procedures, research and experience have been followed from the beginning of time by generations of great medical people. This medical system is structured such that it adheres to the culture of the people, it employs plants and metals that are found in the climates throughout the country, and it can be practiced without special expensive materials without compromising its perfection. It removes disease very inexpensively for all people, it can be adhered to without fear as the hereditary medicine of distinct families, and it can be followed with full confidence because it is based on extensive experience. These are the special public benefits of these practices.[63]

This organic idiom calls for the exclusive and exhaustive conjunction of a particular people and a particular practice, both circumscribed within strict historical and geographic boundaries. This conjunction is most effective when these boundaries are hermetic, keeping foreign elements (whether bodies or ideas) out and preventing the escape of any traitors of tradition. The penetration of a foreign culture will upset this natural relationship, intervening between a pure culture and a pure people. In the rhetoric of tradition, Indian medicine emerged with the beginning of the Indian race and so its effectiveness on Indian individuals is undeniable and unsurpassable. As Roland Barthes points out for mythologies, practitioners of Indian medicine envisage history as eternal nature, an eternal nature which has historical effects.[64]

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[63] "ovvoru tēcamum taṉakku iyaṟkaiyāka oruvita nākarīhattaiyum, kalvimuṟaiyaiyum, matācāraṅkaḷaiyum peṟṟiruppatupōlavē, vaittiya muṟaikaḷum antanta tēcattiṉ iyaṟkai nilaimaikkum, cītōśaṇastitikkum, ācāra paḻakka vaḻakkaṅkaḷukkum ēṟpa ēṟpaṭṭirukkiṉṟaṉa eṉpatu eṉṉuṭaiya nampikkai. atupōlavē intiya cutēca muṟaikaḷum aṉāti kālamtoṭṭut tōṉṟi ārāycciyum aṉupavamum mikka periyōrkaḷāl palatalaimuṟaikaḷākak kaiyāṭappaṭṭu, jaṉaṅkaḷiṉ paḻakkavaḻakkaṅkaḷai oṭṭi tēcattiṉ nāṉāpakkaṅkaḷilumuḷḷa cītōśṇanilaimaikkum tāvara lōkapporuḷkaḷiṉ irukkaikkum ēṟṟappaṭi amaikkappaṭṭu, kuṟṟamaṟṟa vaḻiyil, vicēśapporuḷ celavaṉṉiyil payiṟciperakkūṭiyatāy, jaṉaṅkaḷ ellōrukkum mikak kuṟainta celavil piṇikaḷai nīkkakkūṭiyatāy, pirattiyēkamāy kuṭumba vaittiyamāka pītiyaṉṉiyil aṉucarikkakkūṭiyatāy, nīṇṭa aṉupavam kāraṇamāka nampikkaiyuṭaṉ kaiyāḷakkūṭiyatāy amaintiruppatē immuṟaikaḷil uḷḷa vicēśamāṉa potu naṉmaikaḷākum." *The Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine, Part 2*, 356.

[64] Barthes.

Indigenous medical practitioners declare these organic boundaries to provide a space for tradition against the universal claims of biomedical doctors. The sort of "space" the *vaidyas* create is geographic, in the sense that they assert the importance of the unique locale of Indian medicine in their history. It is also an organic space, in that practitioners distinguish Indian bodies from European bodies and propose an inalienable, material connection between disease, medicines, climate, and an autochthonous people. Allopathic medicines, they say, do not have the proper organic material to effectively heal Indian bodies. Finally, this geographic and organic uniqueness is the basis for assertions of a unique *cultural* space, a space for indigenous medical theories and practices as a whole, since the cultural products of a local tradition are best suited for the local people.

2.7 Historical Teleologies and the "Stagnation" of Indigenous Medicine

Work in the history of science, such as that of Bruno Latour, has unveiled the naivety of the view that science develops solely on the basis of rationality, shorn of emotive or ideological influences.[65] In the field of medicine, colonial doctors consistently argued for their superiority on the basis of rational considerations, while at the same time their work was an integral part of the colonial project. As the historian David Arnold has convincingly demonstrated, colonial medicine had a key role in colonizing India, attempting to "exclude its rivals and establish its monopolistic authority over the body."[66] Indians made this connection between political and economic imperialism, on the one hand, and scientific imperialism on the other. Thus, in the March 11, 1921 issue of the periodical *Yogakshemam*, a *vaidya* argues that Dr. Koman would lose his support "if he

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[65] See, for example, Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

[66] Arnold, *Colonizing the Body,* 293.

thinks that the Indian systems of medicine should be submerged in the British system as India is submerged in the British empire."[67]

The cornerstone for British claims to a superior rationality was a view of history as a race towards greater (if no longer final) rationality, a race that the British were leading. Contrary to this view, both Tamil revivalists and Indian nationalists tended to regard history as a process of decay from an original perfection, a perfection that might be reestablished with the restoration of cultural and racial purity. This notion of history as decay in South Asia is not limited to colonial times but has a precedent in the idea, first described in Sanskrit texts, that historical proceeds in cycles.[68] History is a succession of four epics (*yugas*), the first being the best, and devolving to the present time, in which we are the unfortunate inhabitants of the most degenerate age, the Kali Yuga. History, however, does not just devolve but is circular, as the Kali Yuga ends in a great conflagration, followed by a time of regenerative sleep, and awakening again into the first, glorious, age. Likewise, formulations of Indian nationalism and Indian medicine, while narrating a history of decay, affirm the potential of a future in which medical glory can be recaptured in an independent India.

Biomedical doctors seized upon Orientalist scholarship that told of the degeneration of Indian civilization from its ancient, Aryan roots, asserting that indigenous practitioners had much to learn from British doctors.[69] In response to a proposal to open

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[67] Cited in Hausman, 190.

[68] On the *yugas*, see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); and Madeleine Biardeau, *Hinduism: The Anthropology of a Civilization,* trans. Richard Nice (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 100-104.

[69] This notion that traditional medical practice was in a state of decay by colonial times has been accepted not only by biomedical doctors, traditional doctors, and colonial authorities, but also by scholars and historians of medicine in India Historical data for this degeneration, however, is absent from these accounts. For a recent example, see O.P. Jaggi, *Medicine In India: Modern Period*, vol. IX, Part 1, *The History of Science, Philosophy, and Culture in Indian Civilization*, ed. D.P. Chattopadhyaya (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 311.

schools that would teach indigenous medical techniques, Andrew Cardew, in May, 1918, triumphantly declared that medical science had evolved to a place which would not accommodate outdated indigenous practices, and that the promotion of these practices would be to let patriotic sentiment eclipse scientific reason.

> Obviously ayurvedic medicine, so far as it is 'ayurvedic,' is an antiquated system based on ideas which were of worldwide acceptance in ancient and medieval times but which are now as exploded as the Ptolemaic system of astronomy. In so far as the practitioners or students of these ancient Indian or medical theories adopt modern scientific ideas, they cease to be 'ayurvedic'. . . .[70]

While indigenous medical practitioners celebrate the ancientness of their knowledge, in the eyes of British biomedical doctors who were the arbiters of government patronage, this attachment to past tradition was an obstacle to scientific progress.

In August of the same year, Cardew objected to the dedication of government funds to a school of indigenous medicine in even more forceful language.

> We [the Madras government] defined the part which we are prepared to play in connexion with Ayurvedic medicine, that is to publish the medical lore as contained in ancient medical works, mostly Sanskrit. As the Government would encourage any other matter of antiquarian interest, so they were prepared to help in the publication of these texts on antiquarian grounds, just as the Government in a western country might help the publication of some old-world texts of medical knowledge. . . . That [Ayurvedic] systems, as the council is no doubt aware, is an old survival. It is interesting as an old survival, just as the dodo was an interesting survival in the island of Mauritius when that bird was still alive. As an archaic system it is of interest. . . . But unfortunately it has stopped still at that stage and the enormous progress which science has made in the last century has been a closed book to it. . . .[71]

These indigenous techniques are "lore," of literary and historical, but not scientific, interest. Understanding medical difference through an evolutionary hierarchy of

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[70] Hausman, 159.

[71] Hausman, 163.

knowledge, colonial ministers and allopathic doctors assumed a natural progression of history, a prognostic view according to which the eclipse of indigenous medicine by allopathy was assured. Like the dodo bird, which was not up to the demands of the new imperial world, indigenous medical knowledge lacks the strength to resist the force of truth, embodied in biomedical reason. Its time is past, and so it must, as all survivals, "succumb before long."

Convinced that indigenous medical formulae were not motivated by adherence to a consistent theoretical system, Dr. Koman had also declared that "the science of Hindu medicine is still sunk in a state of empirical obscurity." In their *Reply to the Report on the Investigation into the Indigenous Drugs*, *vaidyas* respond to both Cardew's and Koman's views.

> Long ago Ayurveda developed a system of its own and reached a point beyond which it had become practically impossible to proceed. And that is why it is even now accused of having become stagnant long ago. Sir Alexander Cardew, late of the Madras Executive Council, bore testimony to this fact in a debate in one of the Legislative Council meetings. The practitioners of Ayurveda simply rely on those ancient theories and are even now doing their profession by administering the ancient medicines without even caring to introduce innovations. It is really therefore the western system of medicine that is still in the experimental stage or empirical... Day after day we learn both from the medical papers and news papers [sic] that numerous experiments of various drugs and of vaccines invented by faddists who pose as scientific men, are being made on the lower and helpless animals and results pronounced with but dubious or trifling virtues only to be refuted and hooted down by other faddists.[72]

For these vaidyas, the innovators that propel the historical development of allopathic theories and techniques are Western "faddists," while the knowledge of tradition is beyond history, contained in "immortal treatises" and authored by a "noble galaxy" of

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[72] *Report of the Special Committee Appointed by the Joint Board of the Dravida Vaidya Mandal and The Madras Ayurveda Sabha in Reply to The Report on the Investigation into the Indigenous Drugs* (Srirangam, South India: Sri Vani Vilas Press, 1921), 21-22.

"great souls" who were "illustrious, virile, and learned."[73] Innovation itself is in this view not a sign of progress towards a greater rationality but an indication of imperfection, as the notion that a practice that was once "'within the date' mysteriously becomes 'out of date'" is absurd.[74]

Innovation and the ideas of individual "faddists" are contrasted to the wisdom of countless generations. The authors of the response quote "a well-known English authority on medicine," Dr. Clifford Albutt: "Prevalent opinions though not formal truths, contain truths and this the practical physician does not fail to perceive, nor does he forget that the observations of any person however profound, being the observations of an individual of brief life and limited faculties need some tampering by traditional lore by the embodied opinions of a vast number of observers over a long period of time."[75] Rather than bold, impetuous innovations by individuals, the idiom of tradition, its strength, is that of cautious measure, a sifting of all information by large numbers of people over vast stretches of history. In another Orientalist idiom, indigenous practitioners oppose a careful and measured accumulation of knowledge, afforded by a coherent community, to the haphazard knowledge created by individualistic Western societies.[76]

The argument that there is no need to improve indigenous medicine serves to shield it from critique: a perfect medicine needs to import nothing, as medical value is

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[73] Ibid., 46.

[74] Ibid., 64.

[75] Ibid., 24.

[76] This notion of a sifting and sorting of knowledge, discarding some and keeping the best, contradicts the view of an original perfection of knowledge and subsequent corruption. Both views are commonly held with respect to Indian medical traditions. Of course, the indigenous practitioners here parody the Western sciences, in which knowledge evolves subject to the review by peers, i.e., others in a scientific *community*, and accumulates in "traditional" ways.

measured by traditional purity.[77] While the British seized on the notion of the stagnation of Indian medicine to justify its replacement by biomedicine, *vaidyas* drew on stagnation and decay to assert the perfection of their system and its need for preservation. A. G. Natesa Shastri, a Madras *vaidya*, in a August 17, 1918 letter responding to Cardew's critiques, writes:

> The Hon'ble Sir Alexander [Cardew] says to the effect that Ayurveda is not a progressive science. Yes, because it has nothing to improve as it has propounded the theory of the three principles by which it has been able to generalize and bring into its fold the pathological developments of every disease ancient or modern so that it serves the purpose of the microscope for practical purposes. Similarly it has propounded the theory of panchakarma or the five methods of treatment which has enabled us to generalize the step by step procedure of treatment so that any and every disease ancient or modern may be successfully treated by it. It has understood these two principles so thoroughly that in spite of the twentieth century it cannot be destroyed. The real truth is that the 'Ayurveda begins where western system ends.' [sic][78]

This last assertion, attributed to Mahamahopadhyaya Kaviraj Gananath Sen and cited probably more accurately elsewhere in the *Response* as "Ayurveda begins where the Western system ends," draws a division between Indian and Western knowledge and asserts that the former supercedes the latter.[79] The two cover different territory, and so

[77] It is important to note, however, that the freedom to innovate is valued by many indigenous practitioners. This has probably been true for centuries, as the palm-leaf manuscripts speak of knowledge gained through one's own experience (*kaipākam*). The call for purity has been hotly debated in the twentieth century. The leadership of the Government College of Indigenous Medicine in Columbo in the late 1950's and early 1960's was strongly divided between ayurvedic purists and those who wanted to develop Ayurveda along the lines introduced by biomedicine. The conflict was so hotly debated that the Minister of Health and a faculty member of the College were arrested in connection with the assassination of Prime Minister Bandaranaike in 1959, who had sympathy with the innovators and was killed by a purist. See Charles Leslie, "Interpretations of Illness," 177-208.

[78] *Report of the Special Committee Appointed by the Joint Board of the Dravida Vaidya Mandal and The Madras Ayurveda Sabha in Reply to The Report on the Investigation into the Indigenous Drugs*, Appendix 3, vii.

[79] Ibid., 40. Gananath Sen was a hereditary Bengali ayurvedic practitioner who was, somewhat counter to the statement quoted above, dedicated to the explication of ayurveda in the terms of Western science, founding an institution in 1932 in which Ayurveda and allopathy were taught side by side. For more on hereditary ayurvedic lineages in 19th and 20th century Bengal, see Brahmananda Gupta, 368-78.

might, perhaps, respectfully coexist, though as his assessment of ayurveda attests, Shastri extols the virtues of ayurveda over those of Western medicine, which certainly cannot successfully treat every disease, ancient and modern.

Both siddha and ayurveda *vaidyas* trace their past perfection to the extraordinary insight of the founders of their knowledge, insight which modern people no longer possess.

> The fundamentals on which the Ayurvedic system of medicine is based are so essentially true for all ages that they would have yielded to no changes. . . . The originators of the Ayurvedic system of medicine have not based their theories on any experiments. They were seers. . . . As their vision is far beyond the human reach and their knowledge all comprehensive, they could give a system which is far beyond approach.[80]

Indeed, it is time itself which testifies to the enduring truth of unchanging tradition. "Time which antiquates antiquity and hath an art to make dust of all things finds and shall find the Ayurveda unsurpassed and inexpugnable."[81] While the technique of an empirical science admits to current imperfection, the purportedly unchanging nature of traditional science is invoked as testimony to its perfection.[82] The orientation that siddha *vaidyas* work to impress upon their audience, that of Tamil-feeling and Tamil-devotion, is this

[80] V. Narayanaswami, "Systematic Development of Ayurveda: A Short Survey," in *The Government College of Integrated Medicine Decennial Souvenir* (Chennai, 1957), 79.

[81] Pandit Narayana, an ayurvedic practitioner, in *The Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine, Part 2*, 249.

[82] This notion of the perfection of texts and tradition has precedence in the consideration of the Sanskrit Vedas as "sruti," i.e., as heard from an original, divine source. The knowledge contained in the Vedas is of cosmic, not human origin, and therefore it is perfect knowledge. Sanskrit medical treatises share the same veneration of ancient tradition over the possibility of innovation through reasoning. Suśruta, for example, wrote on medicinal plants: "No need to examine them, no need to reflect on them, they will make themselves known, the remedies that the clear-sighted must prescribe in accordance with tradition. . . Were there a thousand reasons to do so, the ambaṣṭhā group will never set itself to purging! The wise must therefore adhere to tradition, without arguing." Suśruta, sūtra XL, 19-21. Quoted in Francis Zimmerman, *The Jungle and the Aroma of Meats: An Ecological Theme in Hindu Medicine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 158.

sort of orientation, a commitment to conserve knowledge, not to overturn it, in order to sustain the link to past community.

While biomedical doctors admit that their current state of medical knowledge is imperfect, they argue that the perfection of their method lies in its constant goal to innovate. From their point of view, medical knowledge can never be perfect, and any claim to a perfect lexicon of medical knowledge must be discounted. However, innovation on the lines of biomedicine requires an expensive technological infrastructure on a scale that Indian medical systems cannot support. I believe that arguments for the potential perfection of traditional medicine are in part motivated by a recognition of the technological and economic disparity between indigenous medicine and biomedicine. With both the colonial government and the independent Indian state giving nearly all of their medical resources to biomedicine, traditional practitioners suggest that perfect knowledge is to be found in the teachings of the past, not in the discoveries of the future.

2.8 The Danger of Mixing Culture

Perhaps the majority of Indians today use both biomedicine and indigenous medicine, either simultaneously to cover their bets, or else having recourse to one after unsuccessful attempts by the other to heal the illness.[83] Many indigenous practitioners integrate biomedicine into their healing repertoires, especially those who have studied in an indigenous medical college, as the curriculum would include some courses in the sciences and application of biomedicine. Charles Leslie notes that ayurvedic *vaidyas* in Bombay had incorporated "English medicines" into their practice as early as 1839.[84] This

[83] A vast ethnographic literature attests to this. For two South Indian examples, Goran Djurfeldt and Staffan Lindberg, *Pills Against Poverty: A Study of the Introduction of Western Medicine in a Tamil Village*, Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series no. 23 (Lund, Sweden: Curzon Press, 1975), 183-85, 213; and Alan R. Beals, "Curers in South India," in *Asian Medical Systems: A Comparative Study*, ed. Charles Leslie (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998), 184-200.

[84] Charles Leslie, "Ambiguities of Revivalism in Modern India, in his *Asian Medical Systems,* 362-63.

sort of concurrent practice of biomedicine and traditional medicine was institutionalized in 1947, the year of India's independence, in the College of Integrated Medicine in Madras.

It is notable, then, that the rhetoric among many practitioners is often sceptical of the benefit or even the possibility of the coexistence or synthesis of biomedical and traditional knowledge and practice. It is my assertion that the rigid boundaries within which indigenous practitioners frequently circumscribe their knowledge are bulwarks that shield this knowledge from external critique. Their fears, I believe, have been well-founded. The Koman report was designed to investigate indigenous medicines and to incorporate these medicines into the British pharmacopoeia. Indigenous practitioners feared that at the end of such a process of incorporation, the colonial government, satisfied that it had extracted everything of value in traditional knowledge, "will be able to declare clearly that since indigenous drugs and medicines are used in our Government Hospitals no special expenditure need be incurred in helping Ayurvedic dispensaries and hospitals or the Ayurveda itself in any other way."[85] The result is that "soon will then Ayurveda dwindle into oblivion."[86]

The danger is even worse than it might seem. It is not just that the benefits of Ayurveda would only endure in the context of biomedicine. The *vaidyas* propose a grim fantasy in which "Western chemists" analyze and lay bare the qualities of indigenous drugs "for their industrial enterprise." Discovering the value of these preparations, they will proceed to export Indian medicines in vast quantities, making them unavailable for

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[85] *Report of the Special Committee Appointed by the Joint Board of the Dravida Vaidya Mandal and The Madras Ayurveda Sabha in Reply to The Report on the Investigation into the Indigenous Drugs*, 96.

[86] Ibid.

use in India.[87] The fear, then, is not simply that tradition will be corrupted, transformed, or obliterated, but that it will be stolen and enjoyed by those who are other.

Nor did independence bring the enthusiastic acceptance of indigenous medicine that practitioners had expected. In line with the Indian Congress emphasis on the scientific, technological and industrial progress of the Indian nation, the first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, set the agenda for the scientific scrutiny of indigenous sciences. Speaking about the Government College of Integrated Medicine in Madras, he writes:

> The so-called conflict between Ayurvedic and modern medicine has to be studied and resolved. The only right approach has to be one of science, that is, of experiment, trial and error. In whatever type of medicine we may deal with, we cannot profit by its study unless we apply the methods of science. In this there should not be many conflicting methods but various aspects of one scientific approach. Nothing should be taken for granted. Everything should be tested and proved and then it becomes a part of scientific medicine, old and new.[88]

This nationalist confidence in the potential of science derives in part from an awareness of the global diffusion of scientific knowledge. Thus, Dr. Srinivasalu Naidu, M.D., argues, "India should evolve a system of medicine consistent with world opinion. India cannot be secluded in matters of medicine and cannot be content with what patriotism and emotion would stimulate people to adopt."[89] For those Indians with biomedical training, patronage to a system of medicine that looks at ancient texts for perfect knowledge is motivated by patriotism, not by the objective, rational truth of science. Such patriotism, it is argued, will lead to an isolated India, where the development of biomedicine in India

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[87] Ibid.

[88] Jawaharlal Nehru, "Preface," in *The Government College of Integrated Medicine Decennial Souvenir* (Chennai, 1957).

[89] A. Srinivasalu Naidu, "Medical Education and Medical Relief," in *The Government College of Integrated Medicine Decennial Souvenir*, 41.

will preserve for India a place among the great nations of the world. The high status for India on the world stage will be won at the expense of its native forms of medical practice, a price worth paying for these educated, biomedical doctors.

Projects to effect an integration of indigenous and biomedical systems had begun in colonial times. In 1921, the Madras government was considering practical measures to take to encourage such integration. A commission out of Calcutta University a few years before had concluded that

> There is an obvious and promising desire at the present moment among the numerous adherents of these (indigenous) systems for closer touch with modern scientific methods. In time, no doubt, they will be able to make available for the practitioners of western medicine the traditional knowledge which is of real value and will reject, as western medicine continually rejects, those theories which are mere survivals, and cannot stand the test of experiments. The distinction between Indian and western 'systems' of medicine will then disappear.[90]

When directly asked the same question of the integration of medical systems, many traditional doctors in Madras did not exhibit this "obvious and promising desire" to learn modern scientific methods, which in their minds was tantamount to admitting the inferiority of their own practices. For many, the decay of traditional medicine has been a direct consequence of the introduction of foreign medicine into India.

> As a result of the spread of foreign civilization in India from the West, and because of the recent lust [for that civilization] that has unfortunately taken hold of the Indian people, some perverse beliefs have taken root in their minds, changing many of their habits and customs (*paḻakkavaḻakkaṅkaḷ*). The people's belief in and appreciation of ancient principles and texts have decreased. These are the primary causes of the decay of our native (*cutēca*) medicine.[91]

[90] *The Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine, Part 1*, 98.

[91] "mēl tēcaṅkaḷiliruntu intiyāvil paraviya aṉṉiya nākarīkamum, ataṉiṭam jaṉaṅkaḷukku turatiruṣṭavacamāka ēṟpaṭṭa ōrputiya mōkamum, ataṉpayaṉāka avarkaḷ maṉatil ēṟpaṭṭa cila viparītakoḷkaikaḷāl avarkaḷuṭaiya paḻakkavaḻakkaṅkaḷ pala māṟupaṭṭatum, purātaṉ koḷkaikaḷilum cāstiraṅkaḷilum avarkaḷukkirunta nampikkaiyum matippum kuṟaintatum cutēca vaittiyamuṟaiyiṉ

The loss of Indian mental and cultural purity with the entry of foreign ideas and civilization has led the Indian people to abandon their traditions.

According to many siddha practitioners, the weakness of Tamil society in resisting this medical imperialism is due to the lack of unity among Tamils. Captivated by the materialistic promises of the West, many Tamils have abandoned the components of their tradition and therefore have created dissension in the community.

> As knowledge in all fields like medicine, etc., grew in Western countries, the Tamil people were uncertain how to accept that, and they became confused. The Tamil people, who prospered since the time of creation, who justly and benevolently ruled many nations, who were the first to develop knowledge for medical texts, who knew events happening in many different places through their yogic practice (like radios), with the change of times, they forget their greatness, and with the changes of times they suffer without government support. A few among the Tamil people have learned English, deride their mother tongue, flaunt their ignorance of their mother tongue, and ridicule the Tamil people and Tamil doctors. The obstacles for native medicine have multiplied.[92]

While for Weber, traditional social action is characterized by habit, by unreflective imitation, for these defenders of tradition, to act traditionally is to show allegiance to one's community and to recognize one's true identity, while imitative action is equated with the abandoning of tradition. The notorious report on the efficacy of indigenous medicines was flawed not only because Dr. Koman had misunderstood traditional theory,

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kṣīṇanilaimaikku mutal kāraṇam." *The Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine, Part 2*, 363.

[92] "ivvitam mēlnāṭukaḷil maruntu mutaliya ellātturaikaḷilum aṟivu nāḷorumēṉiyum poḷutoru vaṇṇamumāka vaḷara, atai evvitam eṭuttukkoḷvatetaṉat teriyātu mayaṅkip, paṭaippukkālantoṭṭu mēmpaṭṭuvarum tamiḻ makkaḷ, pala nāṭukaḷaiyum aṭakki aṟam vaḷara āṇṭa tamiḻ makkaḷ, maruntu nūlukku mutaṉmutal vitaiyiṭṭu vaḷartta tamiḻmakkaḷ, yōka cātaṉaiyāl (rēṭiyōp peṭṭi pōṉṟu) pal vēṟiṭaṅkaḷiṉ nikaḻccikaḷai yaṟinta tamiḻmakkaḷ; kāla vēṟupāṭṭāl tam perumaikaḷai mau niṉṟa samayam, aracāṅkattār ātaravaṟṟu kālavittiyācattāl tavikkum samayam; avarkaḷaiyum tamiḻ maruttavarkaḷaiyum tamiḻ makkaḷilēyē āṅkilam kaṟṟa cilar, tāy moḻiyaip puṟakkaṇitta cilar, tāymoḻi yariyāmaip perumaiyākak koḷḷum cilar, ēḷaṉam ceyya ārampittu viṭṭaṉar. nāṭṭu maruntukku eṅkum etirppukaḷ kiḷaittaṉa." Eṉ. Cuppiramaṇiyam, *Cittavaittiyattiṉ Muṉṉēṟṟam* [The Development of Siddha Medicine] (Taramapuram, Tamiḻ Nāṭu: Kaṉṉikāparamēsvari Press, 1940), 50.

but also because he had become a "slave to the western so-called scientific superstitions."[93] The *vaidyas* connect the "degeneracy" of indigenous medicine to this "tendency to imitate the vanity of the West, that is now slowly devouring the indigenous vaidya,"[94] leading to the "maya [illusion] of bitter prejudice"[95] and "prejudice against the ancient system."[96] The patronage of Western medicine at the expense of indigenous medicines is seen as part of a larger trend towards Westernization, and is symptomatic of processes that will lead to the division of the community and subsequently the destruction of all traditional practices. "We must realize that blindly following western ways will, in the course of time, result in the decline of siddha medicine and will result in grave danger to the country."[97]

Biomedical doctors and traditional practitioners are united in narrating a decay of traditional medicine, from its position as an "ancient system [that] possessed an imposing treasure of empirical knowledge and technical achievement" to a "decadent condition of the present day."[98] This notion that Indian medicine has decayed and needs reviving assumes too strongly that confidence in indigenous medicine and theory has been significantly eroded. In colonial times, the hegemony won by British notions of the superiority of their own medical techniques was limited to a small, urban middle and

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[93] *Report of the Special Committee Appointed by the Joint Board of the Dravida Vaidya Mandal and The Madras Ayurveda Sabha in Reply to The Report on the Investigation into the Indigenous Drugs*, 27.

[94] Ibid., 65

[95] Ibid., 84.

[96] Ibid., 35.

[97] "mēṉāṭṭu muṟaikaḷai kaṇmūṭip piṉpaṟṟuvatu citta vaittiya muṟaikaḷai nāḷaṭaivil kuṉṟuc ceytu nāṭṭukkē pērāpattai viḷaivippatākum eṉpatai nām uṇaravēṇṭum." C. Meykaṇṭar, "Citta Vaityattiṉ Tēvai" ("The Needs of Siddha Medicine"), in *Iraṇṭām Ulakattamiḻ Māṉāṭu Citta Maruttuva Karuttaraṅku Ciṟappu Malar* [Second World Tamil Conference, Siddha Medicine Seminar Special Souvenir] (Chennai, 1968),48.

[98] *The Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine, Part 1*, 2.

upper class of Indians.[99] David Arnold notes evidence that even into the 1940s and 1950s, Western medicine had made little impact on the majority of the Indian population, who still reside in villages far from the cosmopolitan influences of urban centers.[100] The language of decay was convenient for both colonial authorities and *vaidyas*. For biomedical doctors, degeneration was an excuse for intervention, as Indians left to themselves stagnate and need external intervention. *Vaidyas*, as we have seen, view the source of decay in foreign intervention that began with the Muslim "invasion" and culminated with British colonialism. What is required for medical revival, according to these *vaidyas*, is not further synthesis of foreign culture and medical practice but a purification of Indian medicine of all its alien elements. The language of decay highlights the need to come to the defense of traditional medicine, calling patriotic Indians to support and "revive" their beleaguered tradition.

If there was a revival in the early decades of the twentieth century, it was not a "revival" in the sense of an increase in the practice and patronage of indigenous techniques, but expanded opportunities for Indians of diverse views to participate in particular arenas of discourse previously monopolized by British and like-minded Indians. Related to the Indian independence movement, this revival marks an increase the conscious celebration of traditional knowledge and practices. In other words, there was a shift of indigenous medical tradition from the "hegemony" of tradition to a more self-conscious "ideology" of tradition. This process involved not simply a "waking up" to the self-consciousness of a tradition that existed prior to this awareness, but this

[99] Ranajit Guha points out that while there did emerge an elite class of Indians that shared many of the ideas of the British, the colonial state was never successful in establishing a hegemony throughout the population of South Asia. See Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[100] Arnold, *Colonizing the Body*, 4.

awareness itself radically changed the way in which the relationship between the Indian people and indigenous medical practice was conceived.

Throughout the twentieth century, *vaidyas* and defenders of Indian culture pin the blame for medical decay most concretely on the colonial and Indian states. According to the "Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine", traditional medicine faces

> on the one hand, a cold and even chilling neglect by the State and others who should have been their natural and grateful patrons, while, on the other, there is the severe handicap from unequal competition with a 'rival' favoured with the monopoly of State-recognition and State support. Under the circumstances, the wonder is not that the Indian systems have decayed, but that they are living at all.[101]

Many practitioners likewise link any hope for the revival of indigenous medicine to greater state patronage.[102] Others, aware that they cannot count on the modern, secular state to support their traditional practices, promise that the greatness of traditional medicine will return if the community is unified in its support.

> Modern medicine (allopathy), connected with Westerners, came just yesterday and showed its head. But Siddha medicine, which emerged, grew, and lives with excellence in the Tamil land, today is in a state of decay. It is the duty of every siddha practitioner – indeed, of every Tamil person – to dispel this degraded state and to restore siddha medicine to its eminent position.[103]

As if the effectiveness of siddha were not self-evident, siddha practitioners often assert the *responsibility* of all Tamils to patronize this "Tamil" system, duty thereby bridging

[101] *The Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine, Part 1*, 10.

[102] Ibid., 8-15.

[103] "mēlnāṭṭār toṭarpāl nēṟṟu vanta navīṉa maruttuvam (allopathy) talai tūkki niṟkiṉṟatu. āṉāl, tamiḻakattilēyē tōṉṟi vaḷarntu ciṟapputaṉ vāḻnta citta maruttuvam iṉṟu tāḻnta nilai aṭaintu viṭṭatu. ivviḻi nilaiyaip pōkki mīṇṭum paḻaiya uyarnilaikkuc citta maruttuvattaik koṇṭu varuvatu ovvoru citta maruttuvariṉ -- ēṉ ovvoru tamiḻaṉiṉ kaṭamaiyākum." V. Perumāḷ, "Citta Maruttuvattiṉ Māṇpu" ["The Dignity of Siddha Medicine"], in *Iraṇṭām Ulakattamiḻ Mānāṭu*, 72.

gaps in confidence in siddha's healing potential. For those who hold on to the utopian ideal of a society following a pure tradition, the conjunction of duty and essence provides a powerful rationale to promote Indian medicine as the exclusive medicine of the Indian people. The coherence of tradition is an essential precondition for the recovery of the greatness of Indian medical traditions. The boundaries of tradition, then, are not only to keep foreign elements out, but also to keep the members of the community of tradition in.

2.9 Conclusion

The assertion of siddha medicine as a medical system uniquely developed by and suitable for the Tamil people delineates the boundaries of a system of knowledge that separates it from other systems. As T.M. Luhrmann notes with secret knowledge, this has the effect of not only reifying a relation of possession between a people and particular knowledges and practices, but it also protects this knowledge from external critiques. "The differentiation between insider and outsider separates the magical from the mundane; this not only makes the magician feel special, but also shields his magic from conflict with scepticism."[104] What is true for magicians in contemporary England is also true for siddha practitioners in modern Tamil Nadu – their practices under attack as unscientific or forged, they delineate a sphere called unique tradition within which the scrutiny of the outsider is rejected.

The delineation of a distinct community is at the same time a claim for the uniqueness of that community. If the character of a community is not sufficiently unique, then that community faces the danger of assimilation into other, often larger, communities. At the same time that the boundaries of tradition shield the community from external criticism, then, they are also asserted in attempts to preserve the purity and coherence of tradition, even as these borders themselves define the criteria for what is

[104] T.M. Luhrmann, "The Magic of Secrecy, " in *Ethos* 17, no. 2, (June, 1989), 139.

pure and what is foreign. Alien languages, ideas, and people must be prevented from entering and diluting the glory of tradition. These boundaries also delineate the contours of *duty*, of Tamil-feeling and Tamil-devotion, that might instill adherence and commitment to tradition in order to counter the centripetal "magnetism" of external traditions. These boundaries do not so much reflect the nature of cultural interaction, which is never pure, as they are ideal constructions and hopeful aspirations, meant to establish models for the *separation* of communities.

CHAPTER THREE

THE OTHER AND THE UTOPIA OF TRADITION

3.1 Introduction

While for many Indian medical practitioners, the proper boundaries of tradition have been those between India, on the one hand, and the West on the other, most Tamil *vaidyas* have sought a different traditional space, one in which the main other is not the allopath but the ayurvedic practitioner. In this chapter, I will examine the historical circumstances in which some Tamils came to promote this particular configuration of community identities. In addition, my theoretical agenda will be to analyze more closely the relationship between a social "other" and the aspirations of the self.

One of the most prominent features of formulations of Tamil identity in the past century has been the demonization of an "other." In many narratives of Tamil identity, especially those which stress the uniqueness of Tamil culture vis-à-vis the rest of India, the specified other is the brahman caste. While it is obvious that the self must be defined in process of self-identity, it is less clear why others are so prominent in identity narratives. I suggested earlier that the contours of any tradition take their shape in relationship with external traditions. That traditions are not hermetic is a historical fact, and yet the prominence of a brahman other in Tamil narratives of community compel a closer examination of the role the other is made to play.

Among the ways that one might address this problem, the consideration of social identity as a semiotic process seems initially promising. The term "Tamil," for example, is a signifier that designates a signified community. Following Saussure, the conjunction of a signifier and a signified, i.e., a sign, that is not considered in relation to other signs

has no value or meaning. A word has value only in the context of a linguistic system, an interdependent whole which is perpetuated within a language community.[1] Conceptual meaning emerges solely through "relations and differences with respect to the other terms of language."[2] At the material level, phonic differences of words within a language system are necessary for signification, as the phonic distinctness of a word is more important than any positive relationship between the word as signifier and the designated signified. Likewise, at the level of the meaning of the sign, a word has meaning only insofar as it occupies a semantic space that is different from other words. The broader point is that semantic meaning emerges through difference and contrast, and likewise the identity of a community will only be meaningful in its relationship with, and difference from, other communities. On account of this universal process of the construction of meaning through distinction, the process of self-identification will necessarily entail contrasting others.

Many theorists of community identity take this sort of Saussurean line. For example, Stuart Hall observes: "Another critical thing about identity is that it is partly the relationship between you and the Other. Only when there is an Other can you know who you are."[3] Difference is an essential aspect of identity, as the relationship between identity and difference is such that "you can't think of them without each other."[4] The presence of the other in identity narratives, according to this view, is axiomatic.

There are some problems with this account, however. First, signs that designate entire histories or communities, e.g., Canadians, and their relationship with similar signs,

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[1] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. with an introduction and notes by Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966), 113.

[2] Ibid., 117.

[3] Hall, 13.

[4] Ibid., 14.

e.g., Americans, have a complexity that requires deeper analysis than a formal characterization of contrast or difference. The "explanation" of the role of the other as simply "necessary" does not explain, for example, why the characterization of an other often takes a pernicious form, nor does it account for the complex relationships that traditions forge with a variety of other traditions.[5] Second, the assertion of an other as a formal necessity in the process of self-definition risks naturalizing the very opposition between other and self asserted by those who promote identity. Third, insofar as community identity is at the same time *self*-identity, it is formulated with a reflexivity that ordinary words do not have. That is to say, language is a tool of an actor who in some way transcends the language, who can stand above it and see that hot and cold are defined in relation to one another. Identifying one's community, on the other hand, entails identifying oneself, and so does not afford this sort of distance. One constructs meaning from the standpoint of one of the terms in a way that one does not when considering other words.

My own approach will focus less on formal linguistic features and more on social processes. Here I will briefly lay out the structure of my argument. Basic to many formulations of identity, especially those that assert a national identity and thus imply or advance a political agenda, is the envisioning of an ideal society. This social vision is not yet realized, or else it is purported to have been realized in the distant past. On account of the incongruity between this ideal society and the less than ideal present, such formulations of identity imply a plan of action that generally targets another group, an other that is outside of the self and that is responsible for the non-realization of the imagined ideal society. In this sense, I argue, the other is not a given component of the

[5] As Fredric Jameson points out, "the essential point to be made is not so much that he is feared because he is evil; rather he is evil *because* he is Other, alien, different, strange, unclean, and unfamiliar." [italics in original] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 115.

definitional process but is made to serve more strategic purposes of both a political and a psychological nature. Politically, the other often explains the non-existence of the ideal society – the other intervenes, consciously and selfishly, between the self and some ideal, social goal, and so the other must be destroyed. On the other hand, psychologically, the ideal society is only imaginable because of the delineation of an other that is responsible for its non-existence. Without an other, the ideal society should describe the social present, which is clearly not the case. We can only sustain the illusion, and the hope, of the possibility of achieving the ideal state if we explain, in historical terms, the reason for its non-existence in the present.

3.2 Utopian Narratives

The appeal of nationalist history in South India has been a vision of utopia. Utopia, a perfect society, was coined by Thomas More as the title of his book *Utopia* in 1516. "Utopia" plays on the ambiguity between the Greek "eu-topia" (good place) and "ou-topia" (no place).[6] While some theorists argue that More invented a new literary form, concluding that utopian narrative is a Western literary tradition, I want to delineate the concept in such a way that it can apply outside of such parochial delineations.[7]

Karl Mannheim isolates several features of utopia. "A state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs. . . . Only those orientations transcending reality will be referred to by us as utopian which, when they pass over into conduct, tend to shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time."[8] First, a utopia is a "state of mind" – the "place" of the "no place"

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[6] Thanks to Bruce Lincoln for clarifying this point.

[7] For example, see Krishan Kumar, *Utopianism*, in Concepts in Social Thought Series, ed. Frank Parkin (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 33.

[8] Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1985 [1936]), 192.

is in the imagination. A utopia that is realized in practice is no longer a utopia. Second, a utopia is incongruous with the present state of society. Third, it is a form of social critique. The content of utopia generally stresses characteristics like harmony, happiness, and prosperity, but the specific elements will change with social position and historical context, as one person's utopia may be another's nightmare.

Paul Ricoeur highlights the critical aspect of utopia, made possible by the distance between the imagined ideal and the perceived present.

> From this 'no place' an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted. . . . This development of new, alternative perspectives defines utopia's most basic function. May we not say then that imagination itself – through its utopian function – has a *constitutive* role in helping us *rethink* the nature of our social life? . . . Does not the fantasy of an alternative society and its exteriorization "nowhere" work as one of the most formidable contestations of what is? . . . The nowhere puts the cultural system at a distance; we see our cultural system from the outside precisely thanks to this nowhere.[9]

Ricoeur points, correctly I think, to the potential of utopian ideas to serve as a basis of social critique, and thus to their potentially radical function in the process of the legitimation and contestation of authority. It is in the context of the construction of authority that Ricoeur locates the intersection of utopia and ideology, yet here also that Ricoeur's model becomes problematic. He asserts that ideology exhibits a degree of distortion of social reality, a "surplus-value" which is the measure of the gap between what is claimed by ideology and the "real" basis of that claim. The role of utopia as critique, then, is to illuminate this gap between credibility and belief. "If ideology is the surplus-value added to the lack of belief in authority, utopia is what unmasks this surplus-value."[10] In this sense, he is objecting to Marx's treatment of utopia as a sub-category of

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[9] Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 16-17.

[10] Ricoeur, 298.

ideology.[11] The utopian imagination is a "cure" for the "blindness and narrowness" of ideological thinking.[12]

My own conception of utopia, which emerges from an analysis of the material that I present here, is that utopia often serves as a critique of certain aspects of social order. However, in doing this, in the process of "unmasking" the distortions of ideology, utopia constructs its own masks. Utopia does not replace ideology with truth; it is itself a construction that replaces ideology with ideology. Here, I am in agreement with Marx that utopia serves an ideological function even as it critiques a given order. Utopia does not just disintegrate the order to which it is opposed, but it also seeks to integrate a social group that forms the basis of an idealized society. In this way, like ideology, the assertion of a utopia can serve as a basis for formulations of tradition.

Finally, unlike philosophical or sociological accounts of the good society, utopian imagination takes a narrative form. In telling a story, utopian narratives are particularly influential, memorable, and accessible. Tamil revivalist narratives of identity tell the story of a prosperous and harmonious Tamil society that existed in the remote past. They narrate Tamil history, Tamil tradition, and Tamil selves, and thus they are mythological in Wendy Doniger sense of myth, as "a story that is sacred to and shared by a group of people who find their most important meanings in it; it is a story believed to have been composed in the past about an event in the past, or, more rarely, in the future, an event that continues to have meaning in the present because it is remembered; it is a story that is part of a larger group of stories."[13] Yet like all narratives of community, the Tamil narrative is not yet finished, suggesting an ending which is nevertheless left open. That is

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[11] Ibid., 6.

[12] Ibid., 17.

[13] Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 2.

to say, while the original utopia has been destroyed by history with the intervention of the other, the future holds the potential to reestablish the perfect Tamil society.

3.3 The Utopian Origins of Tamil Culture: Lemuria

Authors of Tamil identity locate essence behind history, emphasizing the exemplary character of the Tamil people in historical tales that admit the opposite: Tamils are courageous in defeat, generous in folly, and justified in wreaking havoc. In his search for the core of Tamil identity, P. T. Srinivas Iyengar, Reader of Indian History at the University of Madras, in the first of a series of lectures given in 1929, describes his methodology as cutting through the accidents of history to the origins of identity.

> If the culture of a people is indigenous to the soil on which they live, if it appears to have grown *in situ* before they came in contact with other people, it must be solely due to the influence of their physical surroundings. A culture that has grown as the reaction of a people to their milieu is due to geographical and not historical causes, like the influence of foreign people who have come in touch with them by conquest or trade or other forms of peaceful intercourse.[14]

History, especially that which involves the influence of a foreign people, only clouds the real identity and tradition of a people. Cultural and racial purity are not found in history, nor constructed through history, but should rather be located in geography, in an autochthonous, organic connection between people and the soil on which they grow.[15]

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[14] P. T. Srinivas Iyengar, *History of the Tamils, From the Earliest Times to 600 A. D.* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1982), 1.

[15] The similarity between these narratives and those of German Romanticism are striking. Both assert a natural relationship between the people and the soil, racial purity, a rationalized religion; both emphasize the harmony of the people with nature; and indeed, both have a notion that the character of the people was formed by the natural and climatic environment. Both also similarly characterize an "other," a people with no homeland, a diasporic race whose lack of native soil reflected their shifty, crafty, untrustworthy, indeed "parasitic" nature. A detailed comparison with the German romantic narratives, and a more systematic examination of sources for the Tamil narratives, while fascinating, are beyond the scope of this paper. For the story of the European narratives, see Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology and Scholarship* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999), 47-75.

The core of any tradition, the legacy of a people, can be located just prior to the onset of history in a primordial era of racial and cultural purity.

Here, ethnic "roots" should be taken more literally than usual: like all "indigenous" people, Tamils do not merely live on the soil, or even off the soil, but are *of* the soil. They are the products and the progeny of the soil, and their character depends in fundamental ways on their relationship to this soil. To locate the identity of a people, one need look no further than their physical location. It is on this basis that a group of Tamils staked their claim to an independent Tamil homeland in 1939, a nation conceived as the re-union of the land and its people. Essential to this claim is the story of the primordial origins of the Tamil people.

In their narratives of Tamil origins, Tamil revivalists drew on two thousand years of Tamil literature; archeological excavations in Mohenjo Daro and Harrapa; scientific speculation on the geological history of the Earth's surface; historical accounts of an Aryan invasion that were promulgated in Orientalist scholarship; and their own imaginations. The submerged continent of Lemuria in the Indian Ocean was first hypothesized by European geologists and biologists in the second half of the nineteenth century. The British geologist William T. Blanford theorized a continuous land mass stretching from Asia to Africa to explain an uncanny similarity of rock deposits in India and Southern Africa. The German Darwinian biologist Ernst Heinrich Haekel picked up on this theory to explain the distribution of lemurs and other species in India, Africa and Malaysia.[16] Haekel further speculated that this submerged continent was the original home of the human species. Finally, the English zoologist Philip L. Sclater suggested the

[16] For more on Haekel, see Richard Noll, *The Jung Cult: Origins of a Charismatic Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

name "Lemuria" for this land mass, completing the a theory that the Tamils were to utilize in their own theory of the significance of this lost continent.[17]

The first in India to pick up on the Lemurian theory appears not to have been scientists, nor Tamil revivalists, but the leaders of the Theosophical society in Madras. One of the founders of theosophy, the occultist Helena P. Blavatsky, integrated the Lemurian theory into her cosmological imaginings. Lemuria was home to the third of the "Root Races" of humans and was inhabited by apelike, egg-laying hermaphrodite Lemurians. Annie Besant, who took over the leadership of the Theosophical Society well into the twentieth century, continued to fill in details of this lost continent.[18] By 1903, Tamil writers began to use the name and theory of "Lemuria" to describe a lost continent which was the ancestral home of the Tamil race.[19]

Much earlier, Tamil literature had depicted an ancient Tamil land, beginning in the north at the Vindhya or Venkata mountains and extending to the south far beyond the tip of contemporary India.

> The ancient Tamil classics now proved to be over two thousand years old, expressly identify the home of the Tamils to be a region bordered by the Venkata Hills in the north, and extending southward very much further into the Indian Ocean than Cape Comarin [the current tip of South India] and the Island of Ceylon, forming one contiguous country where the Tamil people were the Indigene. In fact one of the poems in Kalithogai [extant literature of the third sangam] expressly speaks of a deluge causing the subsidence of a large slice of land in the south of Tamilaham, and driving

[17] L. Sprague de Camp, *Lost Continents: The Atlantis Theme in History, Science and Literature* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), 51-52.

[18] Ibid., 56. Blavatsky and Besant attempted to synthesize their cosmological vision with Sanskrit learning and the Vedas, and so they had an active program to promote what they considered to be these most ancient pillars of Aryan culture. In this project, they were one of the primary groups against which the promoters of Tamil separatism fashioned their vision. Ironically, then, in their use of the Lemurian theory, the Theosophists popularized a symbol that was to play a central role in the Tamil critique of Aryan racial superiority.

[19] Sumathi Ramaswamy, "Lemuria in Tamil Spatial Fables," in the *Journal of Asian Studies* 59, no. 3 (August, 2000), 582.

> the survivors from their submerged lands to colonise in the northern territories of their great Tamil continent. The consciousness of the Tamil people as evidenced by their literature from the earliest times has always been that they were the aboriginal natives of this southern continent. . .[20]

Tamil scholars conjoined the "scientific" theory of Lemuria with these literary references of a Tamil island to articulate a history of a Tamil people. By the mid-1930's, the Tamil "Kumari Kandam" began to find favor as a designation for this ancient continent. First cited in Kacciyappa Civācāriyar's 15th century *Kantapurāṇam*, Kumari Kandam was one of nine divisions of Bharatavarsha, a place free of barbarians and enjoying a population of brahmans.[21] Tamil revivalists, counter to this literary depiction, speak of Kumari Kandam as a Tamil land free of brahmans. According to their accounts, this ancient island stretched roughly from Africa in the west, Australia in the east, the middle portions of India in the north, and thousands of miles south of the southern tip of modern India in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Tamil culture first flourished here in approximately 30,000 – 25,000 B.C.E.[22] With the end of the last ice age and the subsequent rising of the sea level, this land mass was submerged, and its inhabitants were forced to scatter to Africa, Australia, and present-day Tamil Nadu.[23]

> What was the nature of this pre-historic society?
>
> Thus in B. C. 30,000 the Tamil country then called as Kumari Kandam was prosperous not only in civilization, but also in language development, mining industry and even pearl fishery. These apart, the ruling class was very kind to the people. They worked for the people and made them happy and prosperous. The king was like a father to the people. That's

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[20] Navalar Somasundara Bharathiar, "Tamil Classics and the Impact of Two Cultures," in *The Papers of Dr. Navalar Somasundara Bharathiar*, ed. S. Sambasivan (Madurai, India: Navalar Puthaka Nilayam, 1967), 27.

[21] Ramaswamy, "Lemuria in Tamil Spatial Fables," 582.

[22] N. Mahalingam, "Kumarikandam – The Lost Continent," in *Concept of Kumari Kandam*, edited by Dr. N. Mahalingam (Madras: International Linguistic Centre, 1991), 54.

[23] N. Mahalingam, "The Story of a Submerged Continent," in *Concept of Kumari Kandam*, edited by Dr. N. Mahalingam (Madras: International Linguistic Centre, 1991), 8-14.

> why statues were erected for those kings which in due course of time became temples.[24]

As part of a civilized, prosperous society, Kumari Kandam was ruled by kind and just leaders, whose benevolence was such that they were worshiped by the people. The ideal society for Tamil revivalists is founded on a conjunction of Tamil soil, Tamil leaders and Tamil subjects.

> The Augustan or Golden Age of Tamil was undoubtedly that of the First [literary] Academy, when there was no foreign influence of any sort, when even the racial name "Aryan" was not derived or coined, when the literary production was in full bloom, when the people were at the zenith of prosperity under a benign government, when the social division was based on occupation, and when the whole Tamilagam [Tamil land] was virtually an El Dorado.[25]

The earliest extant Tamil literature was written in approximately the first to the third centuries C.E.[26] Yet even this literature has some Sanskrit vocabulary -- there is no Tamil literature devoid of "Aryan" influence. So, in order to locate *pure* Tamil culture and identity, before the supposed invasion of the Aryans, Tamil revivalist leaders boldly historicize beyond history, speaking in authoritative, hopeful tones about the nature of Tamil beginnings. The invocation of El Dorado is apt. Like the city of gold imagined by the Spaniards in the heart of the New World, Lemuria was literally covered with gold. Simply falling on the ground, "one becomes covered with gold dust."[27] This place, they

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[24] C. S. Mahadevan, "Kumari Kandam – Land of Gold Mines," in *Kumarikkaṇṭam Maṟṟum Cintuveḷi Mānāṭṭu Malar: Tamiḻ Aṉṉaikkum Maṟṟum Uṇmai Āyvaip Pōṟṟupavarkaḷukkum Kāṇikkai* [Kumari Kantam and the Indus Valley Conference Souvenir: A Devotional Offering to the Tamil Mother and to those who Treasure True Research] (Madras, 1994), 72.

[25] G. Devaneyan, *The Primary Classical Language of the World* (Madras: Nesamani Publishing House, 1966), 300.

[26] George L. Hart III, *The Poems of Ancient Tamil: Their Milieu and Their Sanskrit Counterparts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 9.

[27] C. S. Mahadevan, "Kumari Kandam – Land of Gold Mines," in *Kumarikkaṇṭam Maṟṟum Cintuveḷi Mānāṭṭu Malar: Tamiḻ Aṉṉaikkum Maṟṟum Uṇmai Āyvaip Pōṟṟupavarkaḷukkum Kāṇikkai* [Kumari Kantam and the Indus Valley Conference Souvenir: A Devotional Offering to the Tamil Mother and to those who Treasure True Research] (Madras, 1994), 72.

assert, is not imaginary but a "virtual" El Dorado, a real place in history characterized by prosperity, harmony, and cultural excellence. Most importantly, it was a place where only Tamils lived, unmixed with other people. While the Aryan people lived a life of war, "the Tamilian on the other hand lived in peace, unassailed by any hostile enemy in his own native home in the midst of his fertile lands that yielded him both plenty and peace alike."[28]

The contrast with the Aryan is key. "The Tamilian was a born optimist, full of humour and buoyancy, joyously clinging to the rosy side of life, prone to be happy in family life and inclined always to revel in a righteous yet merry life on earth. The Aryan grew to be a sullen cynic, sour to pleasures of every kind, hating all existence as a misery to be avoided, preaching asceticism therefore as the only panacea for all ills of life and vehemently given to otherworldism."[29] Bharatiar uses the verb "born" to describe the relation between the Tamil subject and the Tamil character, emphasizing the natural and essential quality of this character, not learned but inherent. Thus, the Tamil lives happily, connected to the earth. The Aryan, on the other hand, is not born with any sort of character, but "grows" to be cynical and pessimistic. Character for the Aryan is not a natural essence but is developed through history, and it is therefore composed of contingent, unstable qualities. It is not surprising, then, that the attitude of the Aryan to the earth, which in this discourse symbolizes natural essence and stability, is one of alienation, leading him to develop an attitude of disgust and a desire for escape from this world.

Irāma Tarumanīti distinguishes four essential qualities (*kuṇaṅkaḷ*) of the Tamil people of Kumari Kandam: rational thought (*pakuttaṟivu*), working hard, struggling

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[28] Bharatiar, 29.

[29] Ibid., 36.

courageously, and sharing in eating.[30] These qualities are not general and imprecise, but are well-chosen for the particular ideological "work" that this narrative is meant to do. For example, to share one's food is in pointed contrast to strict caste prohibitions that dictate who can eat food cooked by whom. According to these narratives, caste, that paradigm of social inequality, is not natural to Tamil society but was introduced by the Aryans. Rational thought and working hard are qualities lacked by Aryan brahmans, who, elsewhere in this narrative, subject Tamils through the diffusion of superstitious mythologies and parasitically enjoy the fruits of Tamil labor.

Tarumanīti, like a scientist, claims to be merely locating the laws of nature in his analysis, the laws and essences that underlie the events that compose history. "The reason that Tamils follow these four qualities is because good (*naṉmai*) and bad (*tīmai*) are inscribed into the natural structure of the world, which rotates and changes from day to night. Therefore, the beings that appear in this world are divided into two types, good animals and people, and bad animals and people."[31] These natural divisions correspond to terrestrial divisions. "According to the laws of nature, there were two types of people: Tamils who lived in Kumari Kandam, and people who lived outside of Kumari Kandam."[32] Only the Tamils enjoyed the components of civilization, while others lived as animals.[33] Most importantly, struggle is necessary in this post-Lemurian world of

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[30] Irāma Tarumanīti, *Kumarikkaṇṭattu Nākarikam* [The Kumari Kandam Civilization] (Vilruppuram: Muttup Patippakam, 1987), 14.

[31] "tamiḻarkaḷ innāṉku vakaik kuṇaṅkaḷaip piṉpaṟṟiyataṟkuriyak kāraṇam iravu, pakal eṉṟu māṟi māṟic cuḻalum ivvulakam naṉmaikaḷum tīmaikaḷum kalanta iyaṟkaip paṭaippākum. ataṉāl ivvulakil tōṉṟiya uririṉaṅkaḷ nalla vilaṅkukaḷ, nalla māṉiṭarkaḷ; tīya vilaṅkukaḷ, tīya māṉiṭarkaḷ eṉṟu iruvakaikaḷāka uriyiṉaṅkaḷ tōṉṟi uḷḷaṉa." Ibid., 15.

[32] "iyaṟkaip pariṇāma vitippaṭi maṉita iṉaṅkaḷ vāṟupaṭṭa iru vakai maṉita iṉaṅkaḷākap pirintu vāḻntārkaḷ. avarkaḷ kumarik kaṇṭattil vāḻnta tamiḻarkaḷ; kumarikaṇṭattiṟku appāl vāḻnta maṇitarkaḷ." Ibid., 202.

[33] Ibid., 223.

racial mixing. "When evil creatures and evil humans do harm to other creatures and humans, Tamils were those heroes who fearlessly struggled against that."[34]

3.4 The Invasion of Utopia

The blissful seclusion of the Tamil people was not to last. The demise of Kumari Kandam came with the end of the most recent ice age and the rising of the seas. The majority of the pristine Tamil land was submerged, and Tamils were forced to migrate elsewhere. Finding themselves in many places in the midst of barbarians, they had to begin their courageous struggle with history. In some narratives, Tamils simply moved to the northern realms of the continent, coterminous with present day Tamil Nadu, where they continued with their glorious, if somewhat curtailed, civilization.[35] According to other accounts, Tamils settled in Africa, Australia, and Asia, civilizing the barbarian people as they went along, and intermarrying to create new races, languages, and civilizations. Tamils, according to this narrative, are the source of all civilized culture in the world, including that of Europe. Tamils migrated through Asia to Europe, mixed with the people there, and in this way the European races were formed.

In both narratives, the final haven for Tamil purity was within the borders that define present day Tamil Nadu. Here their relation to the environment and soil was undisturbed, and so only here were they properly autochthonous. Most hold that this area was the only part of Lemuria to survive the deluge, and so it is the last remnant of the great primordial Tamil land.[36] Unlike Africa or Australia, there were no indigenous

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[34] "tīya vilaṅkukaḷālum, tīya māṉiṭarkaḷālum maṟṟ vilaṅkukaḷukkum, māṉiṭkaḷukkum tīmai uṇṭākkum pōtu avaṟṟai etirrrup pōrāṭa aṭcāmai eṉṉum vīram uṭaiyavarāka tamiḻarkaḷ iruntārkaḷ." Ibid., 15.

[35] Bharatiar, 27.

[36] Navalar Somasundara Bharathiar, "The Pre-deluge Pandinad and her Southern Frontier," in *The Papers of Dr. Navalar Somasundara Bharathiar*, ed. S. Sambasivan (Madurai, India: Navalar Puthaka Nilayam, 1967), 106.

others to corrupt the blood of the Tamils, so Tamil civilization was able to retain the glory of Kumari Kandam for a few millennia. But their peace was not to last. The Aryans, a European race, were coming. First they moved into North India, where they destroyed the great Indus Valley civilization. They then set their sights on destroying the Tamil culture of the south.[37] In the words of Tarumanīti,

> With the change of the times, foreigners entered the Tamil country, attained a high social place, made the Tamils slaves, dug a hole and buried the Tamil language and Tamil civilization. Tamils, seeing the magic and illusions demonstrated by the foreigners, were mentally corrupted (*putti keṭṭa tamiḻarkaḷ*), and bit by bit they lost the four good qualities and became arrogant like animals. No longer knowing the incomparable greatness of Tamil, Tamils, like beggars grasping onto spit, took an interest in the poison [foreign] language. They regarded Tamil as insignificant, and forgot it, rejected it, despised it.[38]

It was the loss of rationality (*pakuttaṟivu*), more literally "analytic thought," that led to the loss of the other qualities and the downfall of Tamil civilization. The Aryans blinded the rational nature of the Tamils with their "magic and illusions." These Aryan superstitions, otherwise known as Hinduism, seeped into the bodies and minds of Tamils. Their original purity tainted, Tamils lost sight of their original nature and goodness (which, as we will see later, nevertheless forever exists, submerged at the core of each Tamil). It will be the recovery of rationality that will put Tamils back in touch with their real selves, that will unify the Tamil race, reveal to them the greatness of their language and culture, and set them on the path to a new, ideal Tamil society, envisioned as the revival of the greatness of Lemuria.

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[37] Tarumanīti, 219-220.

[38] "kālac cūḻnilaiyāl, aṉṉiya nāṭṭavarkaḷum, aṇṭai mānilattavarumē tamiḻakattil nuḻaintu uccam peṟṟu tamiḻarkaḷai aṭimai ākki tamiḻaṉaik koṇṭu tamiḻ moḻiyaiyum tamiḻar nākarikattaiyum kuḻi tōṇṭipputaittu varukiṟārkaḷ. Tamiḻarkaḷiṉ perumpālōr tamiḻarkaḷ allātavarkaḷ kāṭṭum cākacaṅkaḷai û māyā jāla vittaikaḷaiyum kaṇṭu putti keṭṭa tamiḻarkaḷ vaḻi vaḻiyāka vanta nāṉku vakaik kuṇaṅkaḷaiyum iḻantu vilaṅkukaḷaiviṭak kēvalamāka māṟiviṭṭārkaḷ. ataṉāl oppaṟṟa aṟputattamiḻ moḻiyiṉ arumai perumaikaḷai uṇarāmal eccilaip paṟṟum piccaikkāraṉaip pōl naccu moḻikaḷiṉ mītu iccai koṇṭu paccait Tamiḻai tuccamākak karutit tamiḻ moḻiyai maṟantu, maṟaittu, maṟuttu, veṟuttu varukiṟārkaḷ." Ibid., 16-17.

3.5 The Excavation of Utopia

The submerged continent of Lemuria is not the only misty locale in which Tamils locate their beginnings. If it was first the sea, and then the Aryans, that buried Tamil culture and language, it was European archeologists who dug up early sites of Tamil civilization. Here, the physicality of archeological digs and the testimony of "unbiased" European experts are marshaled for the Tamil cause. This view, sometimes an alternative theory to that of Lemuria, but more often integrated into that narrative, claims that the history of the Tamil people can be traced to the Indus Valley civilization in modern-day Pakistan, a theory that extends the northern boundaries of the Tamil utopia. It is here also that many locate the first encounter of Tamils with the advancing Aryans, the beginning of the downfall of Tamil civilization.

The Indus Valley is one of the great archeological sites in the world, where cities with advanced building structures, a complex drainage system, and a large number of seals have been uncovered. Determining the identity of the Indus people and deciphering their script are among the great uncompleted projects in archeology. Of course, scientific uncertainty has its advantages for those whose purposes are other than descriptive, and Tamil forces of identity construction advance their own claims to the identity of these people.

Like the Lemurian theory, the excavation of the Indus valley sites provided a physical, scientific setting on which Tamil identity makers could locate and substantiate their cultural and political theories. The Rig Veda speaks of the presence of "*dāsas*" that the Aryans encountered and enslaved.[39] Even before the discovery of the Indus Valley civilization, Tamils had asserted that these *dāsas* were Tamils, indigenous to India and pushed south by the Aryans migrating from the north. The excavations of sites at

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[39] See Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, translator, *The Rig Veda, An Anthology* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986).

Harappa in 1922 and Mohenjodaro in 1923 were fuel for the identity machine. There was now scientific "evidence" for the assertion that a thriving, sophisticated urban society predated the arrival of the Aryans into North India. In arguing that the Indus civilization was Tamil, Nātan reports that John Hubert Marshall, one of the early leaders of this excavation, compared archeological finds with the cultural descriptions found in early Sanskrit Vedic literature. According to Nātan, Marshall not only asserted that the Indus Civilization was not Aryan, but also confirmed that "for centuries the Aryans went to other countries and destroyed the great civilizations of others. Only later were they to slowly develop their own civilization."[40]

One of the grounds for this conclusion was that the excavations produced no evidence of horses or sacrificial halls, two key elements of Vedic culture.[41] The absence of sacrificial halls is significant to archeologists and Tamils alike. The Vedic sacrificial ritual is perhaps the paradigmatic ritual of a variety of rituals that are practiced in Tamil Nadu today, rituals that often demand brahman priests and that Tamil identity leaders have asserted are crucial elements of the Aryan ideological subjugation of rational Tamils. For Nātan, the absence of sacrificial halls is evidence of an ancient scientific society that he links to Kumari Kandam. He concludes that the only relation between the Indus Valley Civilization and the Aryans is that the Aryans destroyed it.[42]

Clearly, these identity narratives have features which many consider essential to utopian writing. They depict a perfect, harmonious society. They are narratives, telling

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[40] "pala nūṟu āṇṭukaḷāka avarkaḷ kaṅkaryam avarkaḷ ententa nāṭukaḷukkuc ceṉṟālum aṉkellām ēṉaiyōrkaḷuṭaiya ciṟanta nākarikaṅkaḷaic citaippatu. piṉṉark kālappōkkil paṭippaṭiyāka tāṅkaḷum nākarikam aṭaivatu eṉpatēyākum." Nātan, "Cintuveḷi Nākarikam Paṟṟiya Varalāṟṟu Maṟaippu Vēlaikaḷukku Maṟuppu" ["Refutation of the Attempt to Obscure the History of the Indus Valley Civilization"], in *Kumarikkaṇṭam Maṟṟum Cintuveḷi Māṉāṭṭu Malar*, 64.

[41] Naṭaṉ Kācinātaṉ, "Tamiḻakamum, Harappaṉ Nākarikamum" ["The Tamil Land, and the Harrapan Civilization"], in *Kumarikkaṇṭam Maṟṟum Cintuveḷi Māṉāṭṭu Malar*, 17.

[42] Nātan, 66.

stories about the origins of the Tamil people. In doing so, their incongruity with contemporary society provides the basis for a critique of the present. Indeed, they are not prior to such a critique but have been formulated with critique in mind. While most European utopian narratives are consciously composed as fictions, however, these Tamil authors assert that their stories are true, and they invoke the evidence of Western science as proof. But the "truth" of these narratives lies, I feel, far more soundly in the present than in the past. Like all historical writing, these projections into the primordial, prehistoric past, the unknowable future, the unfindable location, or any other misty locale, is as much about the here and now as it is about the there and then. As Levinas speaks of the wistfulness of human discontent, "The 'otherwise' and the 'elsewhere' they wish still belong to the here below they refuse."[43]

Paul Ricoeur, highlighting the "escapist" aspect of utopia, contends that "no connecting point exists between the 'here' of social reality and the 'elsewhere' of utopia. This disjunction allows the utopia to avoid any obligation to come to grips with the real difficulties of a given society."[44] In these narratives of Tamil origins, history connects the present with the utopian past, hinting that their authors are keenly aware that their utopia is not entirely elsewhere. The authors of the Lemurian narrative reverse historical causality – they project their novel renditions of utopia into the past as the primordial basis from which history emerged. Characterizing the present in ways that resound with their audience as accurate and true, the authors of these narratives trace back from a credible present to a utopian past. They map this path from the present to the past with Orientalist history, Tamil literature, and science in a bid to garner two sorts of "ethnicized" authority: the authority of ancient Tamil tradition, and that of contemporary Western historical practices.

[43] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 41.

[44] Ricoeur, 17.

The utopian narratives are discourses of critique and desire, as they invite non-brahman Tamils to participate in a fantasy of the glory of their tradition. Yet even as they offer the pleasure of fantasy, they narrate the *loss* of utopia. It is precisely at this juncture between the contemporary social situation and these utopian imaginings, in other words, at the point in which those participating in a fantasy of pleasure realize that their pleasure exists *only in fantasy*, that the other, the Aryan brahman, is placed, a menacing figure that initiated the descent of the Tamil self into history. Why did the Aryan come to occupy this intermediate, contemptible place in these stories of the Tamil people? We must look at the history of twentieth century Tamil-speaking South India to discover the meaning of these stories of the hoary past. I will turn now to this modern history, in search of the contemporary reasons for the ancient downfall of the Tamil people.

3.6 A History of Brahman/Non-Brahman Relations in the Twentieth Century

It is difficult to point to a single, primary cause for the dichotomization of Tamil and brahman and for the assertion that brahmans and non-brahmans compose radically different ethnic communities.[45] Non-brahmans have never formed a distinct, coherent group in South India. Tamil brahmans speak Tamil, and they have made significant contributions to the composition and study of Tamil literature and to its promotion as one of the world's great literatures.[46] There is no literary evidence of a Tamil society without brahmans nor a culture free of Sanskritic elements that are generally associated with brahmans. Indeed, in many narratives of Tamil identity, the historical record has been

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[45] While I will be concerned with some immediate historical causes of the character of Tamil identity narratives, there are many relevant factors in more distant history which I will not address here.

[46] Probably the greatest figure of modern Tamil scholarship is Dr. U. V. Swaminatha Iyer, a brahman who was almost single-handedly responsible for bringing to light Tamil sangam literature. For an account of his work in Tamil literature, see U. V. Swaminathaiyar, *The Story of My Life*, trans. S. K. Guruswamy (Madras: Dr. U. V. Swaminathaiyer Library, 1980).

interpreted in ways that counter the narrative of brahman as other, instead telling the story of brahman integration in Tamil society, celebrating the synthesis of Sanskrit and Tamil, and asserting the essential role of brahmans in the formation of modern Tamil culture.

On the other hand, the caste composition of South India has particular characteristics that have made this radical social dichotomization a plausible and effective narrative. There is an extremely small population of so-called "intermediate castes," i.e., kṣatriyas (royalty and military) and vaiśyas (merchants).[47] The majority of the population is "low caste," i.e., śūdra and dalit, with brahmans a small minority of about three percent.[48] Without intermediate castes, there has been great potential for the isolation of brahmans, yet certain factors limited such isolation in precolonial and early colonial times. Among the śūdra castes are the veḷḷāḷas, a number of land owning, highly successful groups which had ritual and economic ties with brahmans, and which distinguished themselves from other śūdra castes by maintaining certain brahmanic standards of ritual purity. As long as these groups prospered economically, and as long as they maintained a relationship with brahmans, brahman castes did not enjoy a clear political or economic dominance.[49] Many of the major figures of Tamil revivalism and siddha medicine are from these veḷḷāḷa castes.[50]

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[47]Marguerite Ross Barnett, *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 16. The term here that is translated as "caste" is varṇa, which is usually translated as "class," as a more general rubric than jāti, which is usually translated as "caste." Varṇa does indeed mean class, but class in the sense of a general category or rubric vaguely distinguished on the basis of occupation, not class as distinguished on an economic basis. Caste groups have two layers, the first being varṇa, which is less relevant "on the ground" than the second, jāti, the actual community that is the basis of marriage, that is of homogenous "purity."

[48]Eugene F. Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: The Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism, 1916-1929* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), 14.

[49]Barnett, 16-17.

[50] Burton Stein writes of the cooperation between veḷḷāḷas and brahmans, and the integral part brahmans have played in Tamil society, in his *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994). For a more pointed discussion of this relationship in Śaivism, see Indira Viswanathan Peterson, *Poems to Śiva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints* (Princeton: Princeton University

However, several factors increased the animosity of a newly constituted, if imagined, community of non-brahmans towards brahmans. The advent of colonial administration and education created many opportunities that favored literate applicants, and brahmans overwhelmingly filled these positions. For instance, in 1912, 55% of government positions were filled by brahmans, compared to 22% by non-brahman Hindus, i.e., śūdras and dalits. These percentages are significant when one considers that brahmans composed only 3% of the population, as opposed to 86% for non-brahman Hindus.[51] Brahmans also enjoyed a disproportionate share of educational opportunities, making up 71% of the graduates from Madras University from 1901-1911, as compared to 18% non-brahman Hindus.[52] The elite class of śūdras found itself at a significant disadvantage in competition with brahmans for education and government positions. These non-brahman elites also lost a certain amount of social prestige with increasing urbanization. In the anonymity of cities, there was a tendency to classify all śūdras together as low-caste, even those who had enjoyed privileged ritual, economic, and social status in the village as landlords.[53]

On the other hand, the opposition of Aryan and Tamil is not entirely a modern one. The association of Sanskrit with the northern direction and Tamil with the southern can be found in devotional Shaiva poetry as early as the sixth century, in which Shiva is celebrated, among other things, as the site in whom "Sanskrit of the North and southern

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Press, 1989), and "Śramaṇas Against the Tamil Way: Jains as Others in Tamil Śaiva Literature," in *Open Boundaries: Jain Communities and Cultures in Indian History*, ed. John E. Cort (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 163-85.

[51]Irschick, 14.

[52]Ibid., 18.

[53]Barnett, 25. The varṇa classification system tends to distort more than clarify caste relations and hierarchy in Tamil Nadu. Castes which are designated as "śūdra" actually practice certain forms of ritual purity and enjoyed social privilege.

Tamil" meet.[54] Elsewhere, another Śaivite poet speaks of the rivalry between "Tamils" and "Aryans."[55] In the epic Cilappatikāram, composed circa 5th century C.E., the Tamil king Ceṅkuṭṭuvaṉ's conquest of the "Ārya kings" of the North is depicted as a clash of communities distinguished by language and geography.[56] Nevertheless, the division was never so clearly drawn along historical, racial, and caste lines as it was by nineteenth century missionaries and Orientalists, who speculated that groups of Aryan invaders migrated into India from the north and conquered the indigenous people.[57]

Robert Caldwell, a Scottish missionary and student of Tamil, wrote probably the most important work, and certainly the work most often cited by Tamil scholars of the twentieth century, which claimed that India is linguistically, and therefore ethnically, divided by North and South. Arguing against a prior generation of Orientalists and Sanskrit pandits who believed that all Indian languages and culture descended from Sanskrit, Caldwell was the first to theorize a South Indian family of languages that has an origin and history distinct from that of the North Indian "Aryan" languages. In his *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages*, first published in 1856, Caldwell used the term "Dravidian" to describe this South Indian language family. Of the Dravidian languages, which include the four major languages of South India plus several others, Tamil is the least Sanskritized. As a result, Caldwell

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[54] Tēvāram, Appar VI.301.1, in Peterson, *Poems to Shiva*, 69-71.

[55] Tēvāram, Tirunāvukkaracu Nāyanār. See P. T. Srinivasa Aiyangar, *Pre-Aryan Tamil Culture* (Madras: Asian Educational Services, 1995 reprint), 20.

[56] *Cilappatikāram* of Iḷaṅkō Aṭikaḷ, trans., with an introduction and postscripts, by R. Parthasarathy as *The Tale of an Anklet: An Epic of South India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 227-248.

[57] See, for example, Max Mueller, *Chips From A German Woodshop, Volume 1: Essays in the Science of Religion* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press Reprint, 1985 [1869]), 63-64.

considered Tamil to be the closest to the original proto-Dravidian language and so gave it pride of place among Dravidian languages.[58]

Caldwell drew caste, racial and historical conclusions from his linguistic theory. He believed that the Dravidian language was spoken by the non-brahman populations of the south before the entry of brahmans from the north, asserting that brahmans have a different racial origin from the non-brahman South Indians.

> Sanskrit . . . is in every southern district read, and to some extent understood, by the Brahmans – the descendants of those Brahmanical colonists of early times. . . the Brahmans of the several language-districts [of the South] have virtually become distinct castes; but then are all undoubtedly descended from one and the same stock, and Sanskrit, though now regarded only as an accomplishment or as a professional acquirement, is properly the literary dialect of their ancestral tongue.[59]

This exclusive linking of Sanskrit and brahmans is too rigid. As Sheldon Pollock observes, by the beginning of the second millennium, "Sanskrit had long ceased to be a brahmanical preserve, just as brahmans had long taken to expressing themselves literarily in languages other than Sanskrit."[60] Ignoring, or perhaps unaware of, the contributions of brahmans to Tamil literature, Caldwell asserts that the loyalties of the brahmans lie with Sanskrit literature, not with Tamil. "Few Brahmans have written anything [in Tamil] worthy of preservation. The language has been cultivated and developed with immense zeal and success by native Tamilians."[61]

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[58] Robert Caldwell, *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages* (Madras, Asian Educational Services, 1998 reprint [1856]), 1.

[59] Ibid., 2.

[60] Sheldon Pollock, "The Cosmopolitan Vernacular," in the *Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 1 (February, 1998), 29.

[61] Caldwell, 48.

Who are these "native Tamilians"? Clearly not Tamil brahmans. Nor kṣatriyas, nor vaiśyas, who, with brahmans, make up the social divisions of the Aryans.[62] No, they were, and still are, the śūdras and dalits of modern Tamil Nadu.

> The Brahmans who settled amongst the Dravidians and formed them into castes, in imitation of the castes of the North, seem never at any time to have given the Dravidians – with the exception perhaps of the royal houses – a higher title than that of Śudra. . . acting apparently on the principle that none ought to be called either Kshatriyas or Vaishyas but Aryans, and that the Dravidians were not Aryans, they seem always to have called them Śudras, however respectable their position.[63]

The Aryans came into the south, introduced caste distinctions, and called the native Dravidians "śūdras," or worse. Caldwell's theories were to significantly influence later generations of Tamil scholars, politicians, and the creators of new narratives of Tamil identity. These non-brahman leaders followed Caldwell in asserting that Tamils are the native inhabitants of the Tamil soil, of an entirely different origin than the Aryans of the north and their brahman representatives in the South, and that caste was imposed by Aryans on Dravidians. These assumptions constitute the dichotomies of twentieth-century Tamil non-brahman identity politics.

Aside from these social, economic, and scholarly developments, changes in the political realm were also important in mobilizing non-brahmans. Here again the Theosophists intervene, with Annie Besant founding the Home Rule League in Madras in 1916. Its purpose was to work closely with Mahatma Gandhi's Indian National Congress as a southern-based lobbying force for independence from the British and for the establishment of an Indian state. Besant was also president of the Theosophical Society, an organization whose leaders extolled the virtues of Aryan civilization and Sanskrit literature. In Madras and its outlying districts, the Theosophists founded Sanskrit schools

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[62] Ibid., 53.

[63] Ibid., 112.

and established societies for the promotion of Vedic morals, and Besant was herself viewed as "the outstanding revivalist of Smarta [orthodox Shaiva] Hinduism in South India." Besant worked closely with brahman politicians in Madras on her Theosophical projects, ties which she would exploit in her Home Rule efforts.[64] Non-brahmans feared that brahman rulers would replace colonial rulers, leading to brahmanic political domination that would intensify the social and economic advantages enjoyed by brahmans.

In response, in December of 1916, several non-brahman leaders wrote the Non-Brahman Manifesto, outlining the details of brahmanic monopoly in economic, social and political arenas.[65] Echoing colonial arguments, the manifesto asserts that the British alone "are able to hold the scales even between creed and class," a necessary condition for a united India. It urges the unity of non-brahmans, and it holds that political mobilization is necessary to fight the threat of an independent government controlled by brahmans.[66] The Non-Brahman Manifesto was the clearest statement yet of a society divided along brahman/non-brahman lines.

The Justice Party was formed the following year – its central objective was the dismantling of caste and brahmanic predominance. Its goals were

> (a) to create and promote the education, social, economic, political, material and moral progress of all communities in Southern India other than Brahmins, (b) to discuss public questions and make a true and timely representation to government of the views and interests of the people of Southern India with the object of safeguarding and promoting the interests of all communities other than Brahmins and (c) to disseminate by public

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[64]K. Nambi Arooran, *Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism, 1905-1944* (Madurai, Tamil Nadu: Koodal Publishers, 1980), 45-47.

[65] Ibid., 47.

[66] Barnett, 358-67.

> lectures, by distribution of literature and by other means sound and liberal views in regard to public opinion.[67]

Despite its claim to speak for the interests of all non-brahman communities, the Justice Party was comprised primarily of educated, urban veḷḷāḷars who feared that they would lose much with Indian independence. If the British were to remain in power, they reasoned, communal representation might be secured in government service, providing opportunities for the non-brahman elite to participate in political agendas. As the "Non-Brahman Manifesto" asserts, "when the spirit of social exclusiveness and the rigidity of class and caste begin to disappear, the progress toward self-government will unquestionably be more satisfactory."[68]

The fears of Tamil revivalists were further aroused on August 11, 1937, when the Congress announced the introduction of Hindi, the major language of North India and a direct descendant of Sanskrit, as a compulsory subject in the school curriculum. The objective of the Congress was to establish Hindi as the common language of India.[69] In the minds of non-brahman Tamil leaders, northern political oppression had become a reality, and any hope of compromise seemed futile.

> How long are we going to be ruled by Wardha or Gujarat [places in North India]? Hereafter our cry should be Taminad for Tamilians . . . . If we want to live as self-respecting Tamilians, we should see that we carry on a drive against these up-countrymen here. We cannot be any longer deceived . . . by [Indian] nationalism and patriotism.[70]

The Aryan invasion of ancient times had come full circle, but this time the invaders were the brahmans of the Congress Party. The only solution could be a separate Tamil state.

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[67] Arooran, 49.

[68] Irschick, *Politics*, 366.

[69] Ibid., 188.

[70] Ibid., 216.

The call for an independent Tamil state is in many ways an attempt to write the next chapter in the utopian narratives, a chapter in which the intimate, natural connection of the non-brahman Tamil people to the Tamil land will be restored and which will render the Aryan intervention a temporary episode. The autochthony narrated in revivalist histories entails a political claim, and the values that non-brahman leaders inscribe at the core of non-brahman Tamil identity testify to the ability and the readiness of the Tamil people for self-rule. At a conference of the Self-Respect League, W.P.A. Soundrapandian, a Justice Party Leader, enumerated many of the central characteristics of the ancient Tamil people.

> Let us contemplate for a moment the condition of ancient Tamilian society . . . . Caste distinctions, religious dissensions and class disputes were absent . . . . Love was their watchword and hatred never found a place in their hearts. They worshipped nature and led a life of utter simplicity resulting in true happiness. Ever since the days when the Aryans penetrated the South and attempted to strengthen and consolidate their position a great calamity overtook the country.[71]

Pure Tamil society was egalitarian, free of the caste system that many, including the British, considered to be the bane of Indian society and a major impediment to their readiness to self-rule.[72] The religious tension between Muslims and Hindus was a major concern to the British and the Congress, and the negotiation of a separate Muslim state was central to Indian independence. Tamil self-rule would be a first step towards

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[71] Quoted in Barnett, 44.

[72] For example, John Stuart Mill believed that caste was perpetuated by brahmans as a way to insinuate themselves, in their role as advisors to kings, into political power. They then usurped power for their own, caste-specific selfish needs. A caste-based society, in Mill's view, was one in which separate communities only cared for their own material interests rather than for the good of the social whole. "Among uncivilized nations, however, it is most common to find a perpetual succession of revolutions, and communities in general small. . . . Every thing which the Europeans have seen in Hindustan [India] conspires to prove that such subdivision of communities, and occasional and temporary extensions of power in particular hands, have composed the history of that country." As such, only imperial rule can unify the fragmented social groups of such a country. For more on this discussion and other ideological arguments for the necessity of foreign rule in India, see Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1990), 169.

reestablishing the pure Tamil tradition, free of both caste and religious tension which were inherent to Aryan tradition. If the Aryan brahmans assume power, however, these features which they introduced into Tamil society and which the British saw as obstacles to self-rule would intensify. Brahmanic domination is not only social, economic, or religious, but also political, and therefore it demands a political solution. These narratives, then, provide a central paradigm to politically mobilize non-brahmans against the threat of worsening brahmanic domination.

3.7 Another Tamil Notion of Identity

While I have pointed to some of the ways in which these utopian narratives grow out of pre-colonial literatures and histories, I have to this point erred too much in the direction of the "invention" of tradition. By analyzing these formulations of identity only in the context of current social and political agendas, I risk downplaying the way in which tradition is always *re*-formulated from prior notions. Indeed, these narratives of Tamil history and tradition are not simply and entirely *responses* to contemporary concerns. Because of limitations in the historical record, it is difficult, though not impossible, to trace notions of Tamil, and perhaps even non-brahman, community in the *longue duree*.[73] Another way to add some Weberian "imitation" to my account is to consider discourses of Tamil identity which fall outside those pointedly political and "strongly historical" debates which I have thus far examined. With the danger of falling into the urban history/timeless village dichotomy, I will turn here to Val Daniel's study of personhood in a rural Tamil village.

[73] This would require a survey of a variety of pre-modern Tamil sources, a study that is beyond the scope of this dissertation but which would, I feel, compensate for a particular tendency in the study of South Asian communities, which, unfortunately, I do not sufficiently address here. That is, most studies of community formation in South Asia do not consider pre-modern processes, creating a historical boundary between pre-colonial and subsequent processes of community formation that are, I feel, much to radical.

Indeed, it is a turn to a village that will support my argument that these utopian narratives are more than generic, supralocal narratives adopted from foreign discourses by well-educated Tamil leaders. After all, the global and urban enter the village and vice-versa. At the same time, the political and social processes that motivated the Lemurian fables have been less transforming of village societies, and so village discourse may provide a useful counterpoint for comparison. I should clarify that I do not turn to this village discourse to discern *prior* processes, to locate a primordial mentality that corresponds to pre-modern Tamil society and which therefore is the basis for a *history* of Tamil identity narratives. Rather, I consider the village because it is *another* narrative of Tamil personhood that is intimately connected to the narratives that I have described above.

The assertions of the corrupting influence of outsiders, the stability of identity in spite of the vicissitudes of history, and the idea that the Tamil land and the Tamil people form a substantial, organic whole, are not only expressed in Tamil revivalist discourse. The notion that land, indeed the soil, has qualities that affect human character, and likewise that people can affect the land, is voiced in contexts far removed from nationalist strivings. E. Valentine Daniel, in his ethnography of the Tamil village of Kalappuur, details how notions of self, foreigner, and soil are salient in places and discourses far removed from national concerns.

A Malaysian Tamil, growing up in Kuala Lampur, was brought by his father to their ancestral village of Kalappuur in central Tamil Nadu. This experience was not just one of cultural education – the belief of a substantial *organic* interaction between the person and the soil was a primary factor motivating the visit. He recounts: "Now I know that it was only during those four months in Kalappuur that I came to know who I am and what it is really to be an ANV [*āṟu nāṭṭu veḷḷāḷa*, a caste of land-owning, highly ranked śūdras]." This awakening to his "real" identity resulted from "bathing at the village well,

drinking its water, and eating the rice that grows in the fields of Kalappuur. . . to know who I am, I had to get to know the soil of this village (*ūr*) which is, after all, a part of me."[74] This ancestral village is always home, even for diaspora Tamils, because it is the soil most suited to their bodily constitution.[75]

Caste, rather than linguistic or ethnic group, is the central distinguishing parameter that dictates the conjunction of people and environment in this discourse. Generally, each village is said to have the native soil of only one caste, usually the dominant local caste, while other castes trace their ancestral roots to different areas. The ancestral village and soil can even be places where not a single member of the caste presently live, compelling Daniel to characterize such places as "so distant in space and time as to be more ideal than real. . ."[76] The parallel between such an imagined, "ideal" ground of community identity with Kumari Kandam is clear. One need only substitute the parameter of national or ethnic people for caste in order to transform these claims of autochthony into powerful arguments for nationalist utopias. Each place is suited to only one community, the community that naturally developed on the soil, and foreign communities, distinguished on the basis of caste or ethnicity, will always remain foreign.

The entry of foreigners can easily upset the balance between the soil and its people. Often, Tamils set up sentinel deities at the periphery of their villages, in order to protect the village from intrusion of foreign substances, brought in by ghosts, foreign deities, or visitors.[77] However, clearly such intrusions do happen, and many Tamils inhabit "foreign" soil. This has certain consequences. First, the different soils contain

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[74] In E. Valentine Daniel, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 62.

[75] Ibid., 67.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid., 77.

different qualities. For example, the soil of Kalappuur is known as having the quality of business acumen. A foreigner residing on this soil will be affected by this quality, and will become a better business person as a result.

It might appear, then, that a foreigner can adapt to the soil and be in balance with it. But the soil's effect on the foreigner is only superficial, and in fact causes a deep disharmony internal to the foreign subject as well as in the social domain. Daniel's sources distinguish two levels of the subject. The more superficial of the two is called *putti* (Sanskrit *buddhi*), most often translated as mind or intellect, the faculty that is the basis of one's common sense and the director of one's behavior. A person's *putti* will change in accordance with the soil on which she lives. *Putti* is contrasted to *kuṇam* (Sanskrit *guṇaḥ*) which is the seat of identity of the subject, whether a caste, a soil, or even a house. *Kuṇam* is the central character of something, its unchanging nature. Every soil has a particular *kuṇam*, as do the people who reside on it. The ideal relationship between people and land is the absolute correspondence of *kuṇam*, which is only possible when the people have grown from the soil. While *putti* is affected by the soil on which the self presently lives, the *kuṇam* is unchangeable, always of the nature of the *kuṇam* of the ancestral soil. A foreigner, therefore, has a *putti* affected by the foreign soil, and an unchanged *kuṇam* that corresponds to her people's ancestral soil. To be foreign is to constantly struggle with a *putti* that is out of sync with the most deeply rooted qualities of the subject.[78]

This distinction is relevant to the identity narratives described above, insofar as these narratives identify the part of the Tamil subject that was corrupted as the "*putti*." Take, for example, a passage quoted earlier. "Tamils, seeing the magic and illusions demonstrated by the foreigners, were mentally corrupted (*putti keṭṭa tamiḻarkaḷ*), and bit

[78] Ibid., 88-92.

by bit they lost the four good qualities and became arrogant like animals."[79] Tarumanīti holds that it was the "*puttī*" of Tamils that was corrupted and not their original *kuṇam*. He contrasts this *putti* to the four essential *kuṇams* of the Tamil people. Thus, while Tamil *puttis* have been clouded by the Aryan religion, their rationality (*pakuttaṟivu*), one of their *kuṇams*, remains unchanged as an essential and natural characteristic. The potential to live as the original Tamil people remains. Indeed, the author asserts that despite this general corruption of the *putti*, "despite the fact that most Tamils have lost their way and changed, I continue to live as proof that even today there are Kumari Kandam Tamils."[80]

Subramania Ācāri, a resident of Kalappuur, tells a story of the origins of land, the human race, and the relationship between the two. Like the identity narratives recounted above, this is a tale of original purity and subsequent mixing. God first made the soil, differentiated according to the six flavors. Then, he likewise made six castes (*jāti*) of humans, placed each on the appropriate soil, and instructed them to live only on that given soil. But these pure castes intermarried, and subsequently their mixed progeny planted crops on inappropriate soils, corrupting the purity of the soil. "That is why today there is no soil that is *cutta inippu* (purely sweet), *cutta kacappu* (purely bitter), or *cutta uraippu* (purely pungent). . . Of course, you already know that there is no such thing as a pure Brahmin, a pure Veḷḷāḷā or a pure Parayan. All are mixed – especially these Veḷḷāḷās!"[81] It is not clear whether this mixing of people and soil affects the *kuṇam* (deep identity) of the people, or only the more superficial *putti*. What is clear is that this mixing

[79] Tarumanīti, 16.

[80] "iṉṟaiyat tamiḻarkaḷil perumpālōr taṭam puraṇṭu iṭam māṟic ceṉṟālum, iṉṟum oru kumarikkaṇṭattut tamiḻaṉ uṇṭu eṉpataṟku ātāramāka nāṉ vāḻkiṟēṉ, vāḻuvēn." Ibid., 17.

[81] Daniel, 123.

is contrary to the original natural order, a corruption initiated by the mixing of people of different types.

In narratives of Tamil identity, this mixing was not of caste but of civilized Tamils with barbarians throughout the world. Pure Tamil society is caste-less and civilized, they argue, and so the real distinction of identity is between foreign barbarians and civilized Tamils. The original Tamil purity is symbolized by their soil being an island. After the deluge, one enclave of Tamil purity remained, that of the Tamils in Southern India. These, the ancestors of present-day Tamils, were to live, appropriately, on their ancestral land, in harmony with the soil and each other, a blissful mass of organic unity. But this harmony was not to last – the creation of the Himalayas and the rising of North India from the ocean floor created a bridge, joining the Tamil soil with the rest of Asia and opening the door to foreign invasion. The foreigners to intrude were the Aryans, a people who had, and still have, no connection to any land in particular, but who were, are, "wanderers."[82]

The term that Nātan uses to describe Aryans is *"nāṭōṭikaḷ,"* defined in English as "vagabond; wanderer; tramp."[83] The Tamil definition, however, is even more telling. The term not only describes a person in a temporally specific situation, but also indicates a way of life, the nature of a people: "he who lives his life never residing in a single place but survives moving from place to place." The examples of usage provided in a Tamil dictionary clarify this further: "the census does not take into account *nāṭōṭikaḷ*." "A *nāṭōṭi* race."[84] Insofar as the purity of a people and the stability of their identity depend on their relation to their ancestral land, the Aryans are an empty people, a people

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[82] Nātan, 64.

[83] *Kriyāvin̲ Tar̲kālat Tamil̲ Akarāti*, 616.

[84] "enta oru iṭattilum nirantaramākat taṅki vāl̲āmal palvēr̲u iṭaṅkaḷukkum cen̲r̲u pil̲aippu naṭatti vāl̲pavar." "makkaḷ tokaik kaṇalleṭuppil nāṭōṭikaḷaic cērttukkoḷvatillai." "nāṭōṭi in̲am." Ibid.

without substance because they are without a land. In Daniel's account, brahmans of Kalappuur are likewise considered to be a "transient caste that lacks attachment to a particular place or a particular soil."[85] They are wanderers and so they are also people of unstable and unclear identity, a shifty, deceitful people. They belong nowhere, and so they destroy autochthonous harmony wherever they go, bringing darkness to civilized societies.

3.8 Tamil Medicine and Aryan Medicine

As detailed in the last chapter, indigenous Indian medical practitioners have often confirmed solidarity, not solitude, in putting up a united front in their opposition to biomedicine. At the same time, many *vaidyas* have drawn, redrawn and exploited lines of division distinguishing indigenous knowledge in promoting certain practices over others. These lines closely parallel the political divisions that grew with nationalism. Hindu/Muslim tensions are reflected in ayurveda/unani formulations, while an emergent Tamil revivalism encourages characterizations of siddha medicine as absolutely distinct from ayurveda. Siddha practitioners, fearing that their practice would be eclipsed by biomedicine on the alter of truth, or absorbed by Ayurveda in the name of a united India, draw on, and contribute to, Tamil utopian imaginings of a pure and unique Tamil tradition to argue for the separate treatment of siddha medicine, or, more hopefully, for the absorption of all medicine into siddha. While the uniqueness of siddha medicine is threatened by the specter of a *future* which will see it eclipsed by biomedicine, the threat to the unique identity of siddha from other indigenous medicines reaches both into the future and the past. In asserting a distinct historical trajectory for their knowledge, siddha practitioners overwrite a past in which the lines between two discreet medical systems called ayurveda and siddha were never clearly, and rarely even faintly, drawn.

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[85] Daniel, 88.

While today most medical practitioners and scholars in India accept a clear distinction between siddha and ayurveda, in the early decades of the twentieth century, many *vaidyas* of these "two" systems of medicine did not clearly distinguish their practices as either siddha or ayurveda. In composing the *Madras Indigenous Systems of Medicines Report* of 1921, a questionnaire was distributed to practitioners of indigenous medicines, and 183 replies were received in several Indian languages and in English. The responses of many practitioners to the question of "which system do you practice" suggest that the division into three distinct indigenous medical "systems" which are drawn so clearly today were in the process of formation at that time. Veluswami Pillai declared that he practices "Tamil Ayurveda," which Shiva taught to Devi, who taught Nandi, who taught the devas, the munis, and the siddhars, expressing one of the origin myths claimed by contemporary siddha practitioners.[86] Another practitioner, Shanmukanandaswami, writes: "I will speak about siddha medicine, Tamil medicine, or Tamil Ayurveda medicine, which has been practiced in Tamil Nadu from ancient times."[87]

The key distinction highlighted by these practitioners was not that of medical technique, theory, or medicinal preparations, but of the language of the texts which served as a basis of practice. To call one's practice "*Tamil* Ayurveda" or "*Tamil* medicine" is to emphasize that one follows a medical tradition that is transmitted through Tamil manuscripts rather than Sanskrit manuscripts. Yet call one's practice "Tamil *Ayurveda*" is also to assert an overlap between the medical practices and theories contained in these Tamil texts and those which derive from Sanskrit texts.

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[86] *The Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine, Part 2*, 366.

[87] "tamil̠ nāṭṭil to̠n̠r̠utoṭṭu an̠upavittu varukin̠r̠a citta vaittiyam, tamil̠ vaittiyam allatu tamil̠ āyuḷ vētamur̠aiyaippar̠r̠i kūr̠ukin̠r̠ēn̠." *The Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine, Part 2*, 340.

V. Ponnuswami Pillai,[88] from Kumbakonam, speaks of traditional medicine as primarily distinguished along linguistic lines, yet similar in their methods.

> The three fields of medical knowledge, generally called "Ayurveda," meaning the path to bodily health, were bestowed by the eighteen great siddhars for the benefit of the human world. Though there are no differences in their general principles, and only small differences in their methods of treatment, they are called by the names ayurveda, unani, and siddha (Tamil) medicine, as they are written in the three important languages of our country, Sanskrit, Hindustani, and Tamil. I will speak of siddha medicine, preeminent in the South and born in the Tamil country.[89]

Pillai is correct to describe the basic principles of these systems as similar, and also to link the most significant difference to language. However, he is wrong in attributing the authorship of all three to the eighteen siddhars, since the tradition of siddha authorship is unique to Tamil manuscripts. When I was doing my research in 1998-99, practitioners always clearly affirmed their medical affiliation as siddha, ayurveda or unani, and they generally asserted these as different *systems* of practice. I never heard anyone mistake the siddhars as the authors of ayurveda or unani. In 1921, while there was a clear sense that medical texts were written in Sanskrit, Tamil, and Urdu, *vaidyas* were less insistent that these different literary traditions may have reflected distinct medical practices.

The cultural forms which were generally associated with an emerging Indian national community were Sanskritic, and medicine was no exception. Indian nationalists celebrated a coherent ayurvedic "system" of texts and practices as the medical system of a

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[88] "Pillai" or "Piḷḷai" is a caste marker, designating members of a veḷḷāḷar caste. They have been Tamil scholars and siddha *vaidyas* for centuries, and have been particularly influential in the revival of Tamil tradition and dominate much of the contemporary literature on siddha medicine.

[89] "māṉiṭa ulakattiṉ naṉmaikkāka patiṉeṇcittarkaḷākiṟa makāṉkaḷāl aruḷiyacceyyappaṭṭa, "sarīra cukavaḻi" eṉṟu poruḷpaṭakkūṭiya āyurvētam eṉṉum potuppeyarāl aḻaikkappaṭukiṉṟa vattiyacāstiraṅkaḷ taṅkaḷuṭaiya mukkiyamāṉa tattuvaṅkaḷil vēṟupāṭiṉṟi, ciṟcila māṟutaluṭaṉ kūṭiya cikitcā muṟaikaḷōṭu, tēcattiṉ mūṉṟu mukkiyamāṉa pāśaikaḷākiṟa, camaskirutam, intustāṉi, tamiḻ eṉṟa mūṉṟu pāśaikaḷil iyaṟṟappaṭṭu, āyurvētam, yūṉaṉi, cittar (tamiḻ) muṟai eṉṟa peyarkaḷuṭaṉ vaḻaṅki varuvatil, teṉṉāṭṭil mutaṉmaipeṟṟatum, tamiḻ nāṭṭiṟpiṟantatumāṉa cittavaittiyattaippaṟṟi vāṭipp¹-." *The Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine, Part 2*, 354.

new independent India. "Ayurveda is the National system of medicine. . . . There can be no doubt whatever that it is a veritable science, superior to the Western system in its curative value in relation to certain diseases, and indubitably well-adapted to Indian bodies and to Indian constitutions."[90] In line with Gandhi's formulations of an Indian nation that placed classical Hindu sources at the center of a unified Indian culture, nationalists most often promoted a corpus of Sanskrit medical texts as the basis of an original and essential medical system of a homogenous Indian people. They emphasized the "natural" differences between Indian and British "constitutions" (of the bodily, not the legal, sort) as the primary criteria of social differentiation in order to gloss over the linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and racial disparity within India, a move they hoped would unify the diversity of South Asian societies and histories in their opposition to a common enemy.

Sanskrit sources, therefore, would set the agenda for the future of all Indian traditional medicine, and medical texts in other Indian languages were viewed as flawed translations from the Sanskrit originals. Mr. M.R. Pandit Narayana writes, "the classification… in the Ayurveda, Unani or Siddha is not quite correct; strictly speaking, both Ayurveda and Siddha are comprised in what may conveniently be described as the Sanskrit system of medicine dealt with in the ancient Sanskrit books."[91] The "Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine" presents a similar opinion, identifying siddha as a branch of Ayurveda and thus proposing to examine only Ayurveda.

> All our general observations and recommendations are meant to be equally applicable to all schools of Indian medicine. . . having regard to the views of our experts as to the common foundations of all these three schools

[90] *New India*, August 15, 1919. Quoted in Hausman, 182.

[91] *The Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine, Part 2*, 247.

> [ayurveda, siddha, unani], we have thought it best to consider them all as one triune whole, rather than as so many isolated and independent entities; for we have it on the high authority of Janab Hakim Ajmal Khan of Delhi that Arabian medicine was founded on Ayurveda; and it is well-known that the Siddha and the Ayurveda have very many things in common.[92]

Ayurveda is the common term that links all traditional medicines (unani = ayurveda; siddha = ayurveda), and throughout the rest of the report, indigenous medicine is solely equated with Sanskrit Ayurveda. The threat to Tamil practitioners is not simply that their practice will be eclipsed by Western medicine, but also that they will be viewed as practicing a secondary, inferior form of Ayurveda, a bad translation of the Sanskrit original. Just as Tamil separatist leaders lobbied for an autonomous Tamil state, *vaidyas* who trace their lineage from the siddhars through texts composed in Tamil argue for an autonomous medical space predicated on their formulations of a unique siddha medical tradition.[93]

3.9 The Uniqueness of Siddha Medicine

Against these fuzzy lines that distinguish indigenous medical practices in India, Tamil non-brahman *vaidyas* began to assert a radical distance from Ayurvedic practitioners, who were primarily brahmans. Paralleling, drawing from, and contributing to a political discourse of difference that was gaining momentum in the early decades of the twentieth century, these *vaidyas* tell a story of an original, perfect medical system that was corrupted with Aryan influence. They try to "untangle" this history of Tamil/Sanskrit interaction by locating their medical history in Tamil revivalist narratives, tracing its origins from Kumari Kandam via the Indus Valley Civilization.[94]

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[92] *The Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine, Part 1*, 1.

[93] I do not believe that nationalist concerns were the sole reason for siddha practitioners to assert the uniqueness of a Tamil medical practice. Certainly, market concerns are also a major factor, as various medical practitioners compete for clientele in a tightening market for indigenous medicines.

[94] T. Thirunarayanan, *An Introduction to Siddha Medicine* (Tiruchendur, Tamil Nadu: Thirukumaran Publishers, 1993), 2-3.

Es. Kē. Es. Kāḷimuttup Piḷḷai, a registered practitioner of Indian medicine, writes, "Our ancestors enjoyed and utilized a medical system that establishes the way to live a life without death. This medicine, called siddha medicine and Tamil medicine, has been in practice from time immemorial, from the time that the earth first appeared."[95] Piḷḷai argues that because the Tamil language is the primary language of the world, and because siddha medicine is Tamil medicine, that siddha medicine was also the first medical system in the world. "Just as other languages operate taking Tamil as their basis, other medical systems and medical fields function taking siddha medicine as their basis."[96] Pillai imagines a time in which all language was Tamil, all civilization was Tamil, and all medical was siddha medicine, a time of no otherness, a time which confirms and reverses Levinas' pronouncement that "Solitude is an absence of time."[97] The "time" of which Piḷḷai speaks, even as the Lemurian narratives which claim particular dates for Tamil utopia, are more of the "once upon a time" sort than they are part of history. These are times in which anything is possible because, being beyond history, they are imagined.

The narrative of siddha autochthony justifies an inalienable, organic relationship between Tamils, their land, and their medicine. R. Kasturi, a Tamil scholar and member of the Coimbatore District Agastya Siddha Medical Association, argues that siddha medicine is different from all other medical systems practiced in the world.

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[95] "nōyaṟṟa vāḻvōṭu vāḻvatataṟku vaḻi vakuttuk koṭuttirukkum maruttuva muṟaiyai āṉṟōrkaḷāl āṇṭu aṉupavittu vanta maruttu muṟaiyākiya citta maruttuvamāṉa tamiḻ maruttuvam ulakan tōṉṟiya kālantoṭṭu toṉṟu toṭṭu naṭai muṟaiyil liruntu vantu koṇṭirukkiṟatu." Es. Kē. Es. Kāḷimuttup Piḷḷai, R.I.M.P., "Cittar Tiṟaṅkaḷ" ["The Powers of the Siddhars"], in *Iraṇṭām Ulakattamiḻ Mānāṭu Citta Maruttuva Karuttaraṅku Ciṟappu Malar* [Second World Tamil Conference, Siddha Medicine Seminar Special Souvenir] (Chennai, 1968), 64.

[96] "tamiḻ moḻiyai ātāramākak koṇṭu maṟṟa moḻikaḷ iyaṅkukiṉṟatō, atupōla citta maruttuvattai aṭippaṭaiyākak koṇṭutāṉ maṟṟa maruttuvaṅkaḷ, tuṟaikaḷ ceyalpaṭṭukkoṇṭu varukiṟatu." Es. Kē. Es. Kāḷimuttup Piḷḷai, R.I.M.P., "Cittar Tiṟaṅkaḷ" ["The Powers of the Siddhars"], in *Iraṇṭām Ulakattamiḻ Mānāṭu*, 66.

[97] Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other [and Additional Essays]*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 57.

> Siddha medicine is ours. Just as the Tamil language, the culture (*paṇpāṭu*) of the Tamil people, and the Tamil land (*tamiḻakam*) are ours, in the same way the techniques of siddha medicine are ours. The art of siddha medicine is an enduring treasure which was discovered and passed on by our ancestors. Its excellence suits the Tamil race. Siddha medicine is the method of our country.
>
> Ayurveda, unani, allopathy, and homeopathy, though practiced in our country at present, are medical systems that entered our country [from elsewhere]. The Aryans came to our country, and over a thousand years later, they created the ayurvedic system, written in Sanskrit. Then the Muslims defeated our country and after establishing their rule, they introduced the unani system, written in Arabic and Urdu. Then the Europeans came and took control, bringing with them allopathic medicine, written in English and in other European languages.[98]

Here, Kasturi uses an essentialist argument to claim that siddha medicine is particularly suited for the culture, language, and racial constitution of the Tamil people. It is a cultural possession, distinguished from other systems currently practiced in Tamil Nadu because of its status as the original medical system of the land and people. The later arrival of other medical systems, and their introduction by "foreigners," attest that their presence in South India is unnatural.

Tamil scholars tell a tale of blatant Aryan and Muslim plagiarism of Tamil medicine, a plundering of the intellectual and practical wealth of Tamils that led to the dilution of the purity of siddha medicine and the subsequent loss of its extraordinary effectiveness. In his review of Tamil literature, S. Purnalingam Pillai narrates a history in

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[98] "citta maruttuva muṟai nammuṭaiyatu. eppaṭit tamiḻum, tamiḻaṉ paṇpāṭum, tamiḻakam nammuṭaiyatō, appaṭiyē citta maruttuva muṟaiyum nammuṭaiyatu. nammuṭaiya nuṉṉōrkaḷ tēṭivaittu namukkuk koṭutta aḻiyāccelvam citta maruttuvak kalai. tamiḻiṉattiṟkē urittāṉa ciṟappuṭaiyatu. citta maruttuvam namatu nāṭṭu muṟai."

"namatu nāṭṭil taṟpoḻutu naṭaimuṟaiyil irukkum maruttuva muṟaikaḷāṉa āyurvētam, uṉāṉi, alōpati, hōmiyōpati mutaliya muṟaikaḷ namatu nāṭṭiṟku vanta muṟaikal. namatu nāṭṭiṟku āriyarkaḷ vantu āyirattiṟku mēṟpaṭṭa āṇṭukaḷukkup piṉ uruvākkappaṭṭatu āyurvēta muṟai. atu eḻutappaṭṭa moḻi camaskirutam. namatu nāṭṭai makamatiyarkaḷ veṉṟu, avarkaḷatu āṭciyai nilainiṟuttiya piṟaku avarkaḷāl yuṉāṉi muṟai pukuttappaṭṭatu. atu eḻutappaṭṭa moḻikaḷ arāpi moḻiyum, urutu moḻiyumākum. namatu nāṭṭiṟku airōppiyarkaḷ vantu innāṭṭiṉ aracu avarkaḷ kaikku vanta piṟaku avarkaḷāl koṇṭuvarappaṭṭatu alōpati muṟai. atu eḻutappaṭṭa moḻikaḷ ān̄kilamum, maṟṟa airōppiya moḻikaḷum." Kastūri.

which the medicine of the Tamils was more ancient than that of the Aryans, arguing that ayurveda owes many of its methods to siddha.

> Now that the Aryans have in course of time enriched their medical science in the way pointed out above [plagiarism from Tamil science], they have come forward to assert the Ayul Vaithiam[99] as their own and to look upon their ancient Tamil masters with contempt. The followers of the Siddha School have begun to expose the Aryan indebtedness and prove its comparative modernness to the vexation of the ungrateful.[100]

T.V. Sambasivam Pillai describes Sanskrit medical texts "literary forgeries [of Tamil manuscripts] mingled with the ideas of Ayurveda in Sanskrit translation." He goes on to characterize Muslims as "avowed borrowers of science," noting the opinion of a "Prof. Wilson" that "the Arabs followed the Siddha works on medicine more closely rather than of the early Greeks."[101]

More than fifty years later, V.R. Madhavan blames the confusion between ayurveda and siddha for "causing heavy damages to the independent development of Siddha."[102] The narrative he tells is one of Aryan invasion and pillaging of the "greatness of Tamil culture in all its branches" in order to "enrich their culture by the assimilation of the highly civilized culture of the Tamilians." In spite of the harm this plagiarism has caused siddha, however, Madhavan credits ayurveda for its "great service to the medical

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[99] The use of the term "Ayul" here is interesting. This is a term found in both Sanskrit and Tamil meaning "life," or more specifically "life span." In Sanksrit, "ayus" combines with "veda," knowledge, to form the term Ayurveda. But here, Pillai combines the term with "vaithiam," the basic Tamil word (*vaittiyam*) that means "medical healing" and "medical system," as in the siddha medical system, *citta vaittiyam*. As siddha takes on the lengthening of the life span as its basic goal, this Ayul Vaithiam, medicine of life, designates the siddha medical system. The Sanskrit Ayurveda, Pillai argues, is thus a plagiarism of both the Tamil medical methods as well as its basic goals and terminology.

[100] S. Purnalingam Pillai, *Tamil Literature* (Munnirpallam, Tamil Nadu: Bibliotheca, 1929) 265-66.

[101] T.V. Sambasivam Pillai, 2104.

[102] V. R. Madhavan, *Siddha Medical Manuscripts in Tamil* (Madras: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 1984), 34.

world in collecting, preserving, arranging and incorporating in a marvellous method all the facts then available about the Siddha medicine..."[103] The origins of siddha medicine that have been obscured by history can be recovered, then, by looking at the best parts of ayurveda. Indeed, because of its contemporaneity with "Egyptian, Mesopotomian, Chinese and Grecian medicines," Madhavan reasons that literary research into the origins of siddha medicine, to be "scientific and useful, should commence with a comparative study of the medicines of those ancient civilizations, which will illuminate many of the dark corners of our system."[104]

Siddha *vaidyas* blame the confusion between two separate medical systems, siddha and ayurveda, for the decay of Tamil medicine. In response to the question "What, in your opinion, are the causes of decay of the indigenous systems of medicine,"[105] Shanmukanandaswami writes:

> Because both medical texts in Tamil and medical texts in Sanskrit are generally called "Ayurveda." Because even though brahmans are a minority, many of them are educated and they have most government jobs. They support only their own texts and their own language, without allowing Tamil and Tamil medicine to flourish. Tamil doctors have experience but no education. Our Aryan brothers in South India deceptively practice Tamil medicine but call themselves Ayurveda practitioners. [Tamil medicine] is not supported by local chiefs, wealthy people, or merchants, who are confused by their [the brahmans'] deception.[106]

[103] Ibid., 35.

[104] Ibid., 52.

[105] *The Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine, Part 1*, 98.

[106] "tamiḻiluḷḷa vaittiya nūlkaḷukkum vaṭamoḻiyiluḷḷa nūlkaḷukkum potuvāka āyuḷvētameṉṟu peyariruppatālum vaṭamoḻiyāḷarkaḷ ciṟu tokaiyiṉarākaviruntum atikam pēr paṭittavarkaḷākavum rājāṅka uttiyōkattil atikam iruppatālum tamiḻaiyum tamiḻ maruttuvattiṉaiyum talaiyeṭukkaviṭātu taṅkaḷuṭaiya nūṟkaḷaiyum taṅkaḷuṭaiya pāśaiyiṉai ātarittum, ātarikkumāṟu tūṇṭivaruvatālum tamiḻvaittiyarkaḷ paṭikkāmal aṉupavittu varuvatālum teṉ intiyāviluḷḷa āriya cakōtararkaḷ taṅkaḷai āyurvētiyareṉṟu kūṟikkoṇṭē tamiḻ maruntukaḷai kaiyāṇṭu emāṟṟi varuvatālum avarkaḷ uṟaiyil mayaṅkiya ciṟṟaracarkaḷum pirapukkaḷum uttiyōkastarkaḷum kavaṉittu ātarikkātatēyākum." *The Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine, Part 2*, 341.

The lack of distinction between siddha and ayurveda, the result of intertwined histories of Tamil and Sanskrit medical texts and practices in South India, is traced to deception perpetrated by ayurvedic practitioners, who are left with no medicine unique to themselves. The basis of medical difference is not only that of language but also of caste, the non-brahman/brahman distinction that was becoming so important in South Indian politics also being played out in medical arenas.

According to the relativistic logic of these assertions of a unique, organic connection between siddha medicine and the Tamil people, the promotion of the appropriateness of medicine to a people appears to compel a view that all medical systems are equal. If siddha medicine is the most effective medicine for Tamil bodies, the same should be the case for ayurveda on Aryan, brahman bodies, and biomedicine for the British. However, to assert such limits on one's knowledge undermines its value as universally effective, and so Tamil *vaidyas* often juxtapose their claims to relative uniqueness with aspirations for medical imperialism. Virudal Sivagnanayogigal, writing from rural Koilpatti in 1923, questions the desirability of integrating indigenous and Western medicine.

> According to Tamil medical texts, there are 112 mineral substances, 9 metals, 25 types of salt, 64 types of arsenic, … and thousands of other medicines. These are not suited for the Sanskrit, Unani, or English medical systems, only for Tamil medicine. Therefore, there is no need for Tamil doctors to learn Western medicines. But if Western doctors learn and use siddha medicines, the differences between the two will disappear, I think.[107]

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[107] "avvapippirāyattaic ce̱ṉṉai irājatā̱ṉit tamiḻ vaittiya caṅkattār oppukkoḷḷamuṭiyātu. tamiḻ vaittiya nūlkaḷil uparacac carakkukaḷ 112, ulōkaṅkaḷ 9, uppu vakai 25, pāṭāṇam 64 cattukaḷ ava̱ṟṟil pa̱ṟpam, centūram, cu̱ṉṉam, tīnīr, kaṭṭu, meḻuku, maṇikaḷ mutaliya āyirakkaṇakkā̱ṉa maruntukaḷ kū̱ṟappaṭṭirukki̱ṉ̱ṟa̱ṉa. avai samaskirutam, yūnā̱ṉi, āṅkila vaittiyaṅkaḷukkuriya̱ṉava̱ṉ̱ṟu, tamiḻukkēyuriya̱ṉa. ātalāl, tamiḻ vaittiyar mē̱ṉāṭṭu maruntukaḷaik ka̱ṟ̱ṟukkoḷḷa avaciyam nēriṭātu. mēnāṭṭu vaittiyar tamiḻc cittavaittiya maruntukaḷai ē̱ṟ̱ṟukkoṇṭu upayōkikkil iruvarukkumuḷḷa vē̱ṟ̱ṟumai vilakume̱ṉ̱ṟeṇṇuki̱ṉ̱ṟē̱ṉ." *The Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine, Part 2*, 337.

What Sivagnanayogigal prescribes is that integration should not be an absorption of siddha into other Indian medical systems, nor into Western medicine, but of all medicines currently practiced in India into siddha. As Tamil revivalists trace all rational civilization of India to Tamil civilization, siddha practitioners promote Tamil or sometimes Dravidian medicine as the original medicine of India, a history that is at the same time an argument that siddha medicine serve as the "national" medicine of India. "Siddhars were Dravidian in their origin and they were the greatest intellectuals of ancient time. The science of medicine expounded by them, viz., 'Siddha system of medicine,' comprehends the entire system of Indian Medicine."[108]

There is, however, a contradiction in narrating the decay of siddha medicine while asserting its contemporary relevance. Siddha *vaidyas* finesse this by positing an ideal space in which a pure Tamil medical tradition bides its time, ready for revival. Just as the true identity of the Tamil people has been clouded by history yet remains at the core of each Tamil person, the knowledge of siddha medicine is only submerged, not destroyed. B. Ā̱nantārāma̱n, a registered Indian Medical Practitioners, writes,

> The eminent siddha medical art has continued for ages (*yukam yukamāka*) in the Tamil land, passed from guru to student in the proper manner (*muṟaippaṭi*). Even though the conclusions set out in [medical] texts have been clouded by history, by the cruelty of foreign governments, by ignorance, and by poverty, the life breath (*uyir mūccu*) of siddha medicine lives on even today among the Tamil people. Thus it is clear that siddha medicine has divine features and stable theories.[109]

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[108] Madhavan. *Siddha Medical Manuscripts in Tamil,* v.

[109] "perumaikkuriya citta maruttuvak kalai, yukam yukamāka curu-cīṭar eṉṟa vaḻi muṟaippaṭi tamiḻakattil iruntu varukiṟatu. nūlkaḷil tīṭṭappaṭṭak karuttukaḷ kālattālum, piṟa āṭcikaḷiṉ koṭumaiyālum, aṟiviṉmaiyālum, vaṟumaiyālum maṟaintālum citta maruttuva uyir mūccu, tamiḻ makkaḷiṭaiyil iṉṟum iruntu varukiṉṟatu eṉṟāl citta maruttuvam teyvāmcam peṟṟatum, nilaiyāṉa karuttukkaḷaik koṇṭumākum eṉpatu teḷivu." B. Āṉantārāmaṉ, "Nalivuṟṟa Citta Maruttuvarkaḷ Vāḻa Vaḻimuṟaikaḷ" ["Ways for Siddha Doctors to Survive Their Decline"], in *Citta Maruttuva Nūl Ārāycci Nilaiyam Mupperum Viḻā Malar* [Souvenir of the Conference of the Siddha Medical Literature Research Centre] (Chennai: Siddha Medical Research Centre, 1983).

P. Muttukkaruppa Piḷḷai laments the loss of siddha medical knowledge, destroyed "when the Lemurian continent was submerged in the Indian Ocean," yet also confirms that traces of ancient medical glory have survived.

> Even though we know of countless texts that were written at the time of the last academy, only a few of those are still available to us. Through those few texts which have survived all these sorts of destruction and which we have in our hands, it is clear that our ancestors attained great expertise in wisdom, clarity, research and service, and rose to the foremost position as the greatest race in the world. With all the great texts written by the siddhars which we still have, is there any limit to the benefits we can obtain?[110]

Tamil medicine, like the pure Tamil society of Lemuria, can be purified and revived. Like the utopian homeland of Lemuria, the utopian core, the *kuṇam,* of siddha medicine has been submerged by history yet remains unchanged. This submerged core of tradition is both behind history and beyond history, testified in its timeless by its ancientness, its present relevance, and its future potential.

G. Sreenivasamurthi, one of the original forces behind the founding of the Government School of Indian Medicine and its first principal, gives voice to the fantasy of many siddha practitioners.

> The recent excavations in the North West India had shown that learning and culture had, in very ancient times, gone from South India to many parts of the world, and a day will soon come when through translations from the original difficult Tamil, people all over the world could understand the wonderful Siddha literature which is still mostly a closed book. Then the value of the Baspams and Chendoorams and other preparations would come to be realized. In my vision of the future, I have

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[110] "kaṭaiccaṅka kālattil iyaṟṟa... eṇṇaṟṟa ēṭukaḷum iruntiruppatākat terintālum, namakkuk kiṭaippavai mikac cilavēyākum. ivvāṟu palvakai aḻivukaḷiliruntum tappip piḻaittu nam kaikaḷukkuk kiṭaitta oru cila nūṟkaḷiṉ vāyilākavē, nam muṉṉōrkaḷ aṟivilum, teḷivilum, āyvilum, āṟṟalilum mikka tērcci peṟṟu ulakiṉ mutal iṉamākan [sic] talai nimirntu niṟkum nilai peṟṟiruntār eṉpatu teḷivākumpoḻutu, cittarkaḷ iyaṟṟiya cemmai nūṟkaḷellām, namakkuk kiṭṭiruppiṉ avaṟṟāl nām peṟum naṟpayaṉkaḷukkōr ellaiyāṉ iruntirukkumō?" P. Muttukkaruppa Piḷḷai, "Cittarkaḷiṉ Vayatu" ["The Age of the Siddhars"], in *Iraṇṭām Ulakattamiḻ Mānāṭu,* 37.

> the picture of students from all over the civilised world coming here, to South India, to learn what only this land could teach.[111]

Drawing from narratives of Tamil identity that celebrate Tamil civilization as the point of origin of all civilization, siddha practitioners locate their practice at the pinnacle of scientific achievement. In narrating a history of siddha medicine distinct from that of other medical traditions of India, and a future distinct from that of biomedicine, siddha practitioners strive to establish that their knowledge and techniques have a unique character, an essence that does not derive from any other source and that cannot be absorbed into any other framework. In narrating a utopian narrative of the glory of siddha medicine, Tamil *vaidyas* claim a market for their knowledge beyond the narrow confines of their particular tradition.

3.10 Utopia and the Role of the Other

To return to the question that frames this chapter: what is the role of the other, and what is its relationship to utopia? Levinas describes the site of the self as enabling "the utopia in which the 'I' recollects itself in dwelling at home with itself."[112] Indeed, Tamil utopian society is precisely that in which the other does not exist, in which the purity of Tamil society is unspoiled, if not unsoiled. The role of the other, then, is as the destroyer of utopia. Because the state of isolated self is perfect, the downfall of utopia *must* be due to the influence of some other. The Aryan resides at the interstice of reality and utopia, between the impossible nowhere and the painfully present here and now. It is this position that makes the other a demon, solely responsible for the non-realization of the utopian fantasy. It is only with the destruction of the other that the utopia will be realized. This narrative, then, is not merely a flight of fancy, or fiction for the sake of

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[111] Quoted in *Heritage of the Tamils: Siddha Medicine*, ed. by S. V. Subramanian and V. R. Mathavan (Madras: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 1983), vii.

[112] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 156.

artistic enjoyment, but is a call to action, a call to purify Tamil society. For Tamil society has only been corrupted, some hold, at the level of the *putti* – it is just the intellect that has been made impure, while the seat of their identity, their unchangeable *kuṇam*, is only submerged and therefore can be recovered. While the deluge of Lemuria is irreversible, the flood of migrant Aryans can be turned back. The survival of the Tamil race, one is led to believe, depends on it.

While less malleable to the imagination than the lost continent of Lemuria, this portrayal of the present is also shaped by the goals of non-brahman leaders. Like all social visions, these are laden with agendas. The necessity of action is proportional to the gap which is articulated between the utopian ideal and the vision of the present, and the shape that this action should take is also easily deduced. But not all Tamils who participate in these formulations advocate a real, physical expulsion of brahmans from Tamil Nadu. Like myth, these utopian narratives, which I consider to be a category of myth, work on several levels. The role of the other, too, is similarly diverse. The relationship between the other and utopia is not just one of mutual exclusion, where the presence of one means the absence of the other. It is more complex than this.

The Aryan's absence from Tamil utopia is one of overwhelming presence, a deafening silence, so to speak. Indeed, I argue that the Aryan is as responsible for the existence of the utopia as it is for its downfall. Without the Aryan other, the Tamil utopia is not even imaginable. Slavoj Zizek's characterization of unrealizable fantasies and the prohibitions which we construct between the subject and the fantasy is the model for my discussion. Zizek, drawing from Jacques Lacan, distinguishes the Oedipus narrative from the "underlying, purely formal structure of symbolic prohibition," a move which opens the Oedipus structure up to more general applicability.[113] The Oedipus complex requires

[113] Slavoj Zizek, "Cyberspace, or How to Traverse the Fantasy in the Age of the Retreat of the Big Other," in *Public Culture* 10, no. 3 (Spring, 1998), 488-89.

that one assume a fundamental prohibition/alienation against realizing the object of desire, in order to function in a stable manner.

However, there is a certain irony here, which is that the prohibition is in fact the prohibition of the impossible. Even without the prohibition, we cannot enjoy the object of desire as we imagine. The prospect of the full gratification of our desire is an impossibility. If the object of desire was achieved, its *character as fantasy* would be destroyed. Real consummation, falling far short of the imagined ideal, would be replaced by another fantasy, another object of desire. The ultimate object of desire, broadly speaking, is therefore unattainable. In this sense the prohibition is superfluous, set between the subject and its unattainable desire. Why, Zizek asks, do we sustain prohibitions in situations where they are superfluous, prohibitions to an already unrealizable aim? Indeed, "if *jouissance* [enjoyment] is in itself impossible, why do we need the superfluous gesture of formally prohibiting it?"[114]

The short answer is that we need prohibitions to sustain the illusion that the goal is attainable. "Far from acting as a 'repressive' agency that prevents us access to the ultimate object of desire, the paternal figure functions instead to relieve us from the debilitating deadlock of desire, to 'maintain hope.'"[115] In spite of the fact that, or more accurately, precisely *because*, the desired object is beyond reach, one imposes on oneself the prohibition in order to sustain the illusion that one need only overcome this prohibition to achieve the impossible. It is because of the prohibition that the desired object appears to be both within and beyond our grasp.

The structural parallels between the Tamil identity narrative and the Oedipus narrative are striking. At one level, the Tamil utopia, the ultimate desire of the Tamil self,

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[114] Zizek, "Cyberspace," 487-88.

[115] Zizek, "Cyberspace," 489.

is unrealizable, because in between the self and the object of desire stands the Aryan, the modern Tamil brahman. But the utopia itself is an unrealizable fantasy.[116] Even if the prohibition were to be removed, the ideal society could not be realized. Because the realization of Tamil utopia is impossible, the Aryan stands as a symbolic, superfluous prohibition that creates the illusion that the impossible can be obtained once the Aryan is expelled from the Tamil soil. The Aryan invasion is not only responsible for the downfall of Tamil utopia, but is also a necessary element of the narrative that enables Tamils to "maintain hope."[117]

Siddha *vaidyas* formulate a unique medical tradition in relation to other traditions. They invoke these other traditions to explain the "loss" of the greatness of their medicine. By portraying these foreign medical systems as threats to the survival of siddha, *vaidyas* call on Tamils to heroically defend their beleaguered tradition. At the same time, it is their characterization of siddha medical knowledge as conquered and thus impure that makes its past perfection appear credible and, more importantly, retrievable. Medical others, whether ayurvedic *vaidyas* or biomedical doctors, are both the reason for the non-realization of utopia and the enablers of hope. These narratives of Tamil identity thus perform a spectacular acrobatic, where many who, literally, reside at the designated cultural center are displaced as "outsiders," and the "real" Tamil identity, which "exists"

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[116] Here, Mannheim disagrees, holding that what is "truly utopian" is realizable in the future. (Manheim, 204). However, while utopia might have concrete social and economic ramifications, utopia itself exists at the level of the imagination, and as such has specific qualities that are unique to it. A realized utopia is no longer a utopia, as it would lose the qualities that pertain to fantasy.

[117] While I choose to emphasize the structural correspondences of the Tamil identity narratives and the Oedipus narrative, their narrative elements are also strikingly similar. The Tamil language, Tamil civilization, and the Tamil nation coalesce in the metaphor of "Tamiḻtāy", or Mother Tamil, an embodied ideal that lies at the core of the perfect, natural Tamil society. The Tamil people are generally considered to be the "devotees," or more commonly the "sons," of Mother Tamil, and her blood runs through their veins. The Aryan, though not characterized as the father, is a patriarchal, aggressive figure who has destroyed the purity of the Tamil mother and who stands between the final union of mother and son. His presence is unnatural, as he does not share the blood of either the son or the mother – so his position is not as the father but as the rapist of Mother Tamil. See Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue*.

in the past, in the future, and on a submerged continent, is placed at the innermost core of the Tamil self. Thus it is one of the formal ironies of such narratives to self-destruct, to generate hopes that are expressed politically in attempts to remove the very element that makes them possible.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CONTENT OF TRADITION: TAMIL LANGUAGE, RELIGION, AND SCIENCE

For the British colonial administration, Indian traditions were more often than not of merely "antiquarian interest." Most biomedical doctors have considered traditional medical practices to be, in the words of Andrew Cardew in August, 1918, survivals, "just as the dodo was an interesting survival in the island of Mauritius when that bird was still alive."[1] They are of historical, not scientific interest, and so their relevance and proper place should be in the textbooks that plot the evolution of civilization. Traditional medical practices are of the past, and so they lack the potential to participate at the center of the modern world. Their knowledge pronounced "dead" with the authority of Western science and British imperialism, how have siddha *vaidyas* justified their practice as effective and relevant? What resources do the defenders of tradition have at their disposal to advance an "alternative" to the authority claimed by science?

Siddha *vaidyas* and Tamil revivalists have responded to these "rationalist" critiques by placing science and rationality at the center of Tamil tradition (and thus also of Tamil character). In a March 8, 2000 editorial in the Hindu, Chennai's most popular English daily newspaper, a commentator speaks of the "scientific basis" of Indian traditions.

> One among the very important reasons which had prompted our ancestors to construct towers (Gopuram) in temples was to preserve valid vital documents relating to the area round. These deeds were kept on the top tiers of the structure. Even if there were unprecedented floods, this tradition ensured that these documents would not get affected. Whenever

[1] Quoted in Hausman, 163.

> needed, they were taken out of these "safe vaults." Many of our customs, being adopted even now, though mechanically or blindly or as empty formalities, were developed on scientific basis. Benefit will accrue if their significance is understood and the genius of our forbears could be appreciated. While conducting special rites or performing marriages, people keep fresh seeds of varieties of grains soaked in water around the platforms. No doubt people believe, in the case of weddings, that the profusion of their germination would indicate the future prosperity of the couple, but the real purpose was that these sprouted grains would ward off the evil effects that might develop from the bad breath of those assembled. Thus it was essentially a pollution control method. All our customs and traditions thus reveal the positive nature of the thinking of our ancestors.[2]

Clearly, the interaction of science and religion in India cannot be characterized as a linear process in which science and the rationality that it teaches has slowly replaced outdated, superstitious beliefs. Rather, science is read back into ancient Indian history to legitimate the components of tradition. The author here asserts that modernity has no monopoly on scientific knowledge: it was the *ancient* thinkers of India who instituted the practice of sprouting grains at weddings in order to ward off the "evil effects" of bad breath, a practice which is simply a pragmatic, effective method of pollution control.

According to this author's view and consistent with narratives that place the apex of Tamil civilization the ancient past, history has been a descent into ignorance, a descent in which the rational genius of the ancestors has been forgotten, leading to the modern day in which people mechanically and blindly follow the scientific practices instituted in ancient times. Rather than a teleology of the rational, this line of thinking offers a teleology of degeneration, contrasting ancient creative genius with modern, blind mechanization of ritual practice. Indeed, contrary to theories of modernization, in this narrative it is modernity, not ancient tradition, which lacks rationality.[3]

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[2] *The Hindu* (Chennai, March 8, 2000).

[3] The irony of this passage is that it appeals to the scientific sensibilities of the modern reader, betraying a recognition of the obverse of its assertion of modern ignorance.

At stake is the recovery of the traditional, of the apparently non-scientific, as a realm of cultural practices and narratives that modern, educated Indians will consider to be true. The rituals of tradition are not empty, the author claims, but only appear so because their truth is so deep that they are beyond modern understanding. This writer promotes the sanctity, the genius, and the rationality of traditional practice, an assertion that, paradoxically, relies on the legitimating force of a particular discourse of science which, in its specific features, was absent from this tradition.[4] The scientific proclamations which announce the end of superstitious tradition have their echo, an echo in which science is made, discursively and effectively, an element of tradition.

Yet this echo, this pronouncement by the proponents of ancient tradition, depicts a product whose value exceeds that of "mere" scientific truth. Tamil knowledge is not only valued because it has an inherent effectiveness, however this might be defined, but also because is it part of a *tradition*, and thereby its value testifies to the character of the Tamil people. Insofar as this knowledge is ancient, it is closer to the *essence* of a people that can be found in its purest form at the origins of community. The most profound truths are located in the past, the conclusion of an assumption that links truth-value to what is old. Indeed, while one might not call a present day archivist a "genius" for constructing shelves that keep documents off the floor of a shabby, leaky, monsoon besieged building, the presence of such reasoning in the past, developed and presented *within* a form of architecture that has come to represent a culture and a people, as well as the endurance of this practice over the centuries, are the grounds on which the term "genius" here appears appropriate to both author and reader. Rationality is only one way in which the value of

[4] I do not mean to assert that there was no science in India before colonial times, and I do not wish to reify the popular notion of the East as place of the spirit and the West as a place of the rational. As I will detail in the next chapter, the tradition of the critique of ritual in India is thousands of years old. Rather, I want to point out that in this discourse, what is termed as "science", in its particular features, is coextensive with that tradition that was brought into India with colonialism, and which was instituted in colonial institutions.

Indian cultural practice has been asserted, while ancientness and the location of practice within the realm of tradition are additional, perhaps even primary, forms through which siddha *vaidyas* argue for the effectiveness of their practice and its worthiness to be sustained.

For defenders of Tamil culture, their tradition embodies a truth more true than the truth of science, offering a genius that encompasses the ancient, the rational, and, most importantly, the self. Tradition is a marker of identity, a sort of cultural copyright that individuals and societies employ in filling in the details of identity formulations. Identity is a reciprocal process, in which actors assign particular character to their tradition, but also, insofar as that tradition transcends the individual in history and community, subjects are themselves shaped by tradition. Because of this congruence between the character of a practice and the identity of a people, the attempt to prove the rationality of Tamil tradition is an assertion of the rationality of the Tamil people. In this sense, the assertion of the truth and effectiveness of Tamil tradition is an assertion for the continued relevance of the Tamil people in the contemporary world.

4.1 Tradition and Modernity

One reason that the dichotomy of tradition and modernity is not a useful analytic distinction is due to the porous nature of specific traditions. Because the boundaries of tradition take shape in relation to other traditions, there is no such thing as an essence of tradition. Biomedicine is itself a tradition, with its narratives of triumph and defeat, its heroes, and its methods of transmitting knowledge to new generations. As we saw in the last chapter, Tamil revivalists locate the origins of a non-brahman Tamil tradition by drawing on archeological findings and geological theories. The ways that scientific authority has been appropriated by religious groups, nationalist parties, and as we have seen, authors of Tamil identity, prevent us from accepting the teleological fallacy that

history proceeds, naturally and inevitably, from the irrational to the rational. Indeed, there is no *typical* content for tradition, and no criteria of rationality by which a particular practice can be determined to be traditional or modern.

As Raymond Williams observes, modernization theorists oriented by a teleology of rationality tend to portray tradition as in decline, its decay due to its inability or unwillingness to innovate.[5] However, as I have argued above, traditions have histories and are marked by constant innovation, and their form and their content are always subject to change. Alasdair MacIntyre depicts a "vital" tradition as one in which the contents of tradition are up for debate.[6] To discount traditions as stagnant is to accept, albeit to distort, the rhetoric of tradition at face value, a rhetoric that depicts tradition as "age-old" and so also eternal. Bruce Lincoln speaks of the necessity of historians to read against the grain of religious claims. While religion speaks of "things eternal and transcendent," history "speaks of things temporal and terrestrial... History of religions is thus a discourse that resists and reverses the orientation of that discourse with which it concerns itself."[7] Those who dismiss tradition as stagnant fail to accomplish the critical distance necessary to "reverse the orientation" of the rhetoric of tradition.

For many, modernity is characterized by a Weberian rationality which challenges tradition "from without... through a rational determination of means and ends."[8] I do not here want to address the philosophical question of whether there might be some ideal, rational authority that stands outside of the history of particular traditions, an authority that would provide objective criteria to adjudicate differences in traditions of knowledge.

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[5] Williams, *Keywords*, 319-320.

[6] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222.

[7] Bruce Lincoln, "Theses on Method," in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 8, no. 3 (1996), 225.

[8] Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1116.

On the other hand, I *will* argue that this ideal has not been realized in practice, even though universality is often claimed in both biomedical and siddha medical discourses. Indeed, a rhetoric of objective knowledge becomes especially suspect when it is linked to the sort of cultural politics prevalent in conflicts between communities.

Gustavo Benavides distinguishes modernity as a particular array of qualities, i.e., "modernity understood mainly in cultural terms," from modernity understood as "heightened reflexivity."[9] Modernity as a stance on history, as "an act of self-conscious distancing from a past," is far more suggestive than the more standard usage, in which "modernity" signals a teleology of progress characterized by political models and methods of authorizing knowledge that originated in the West. Yet even here the term "modernity" will not do. For example, even if the attitude towards the past held by siddha *vaidyas* and biomedical doctors differ in fundamental ways, to call the latter attitude "modernity" is an act of "temporal distancing."[10] Besides its obvious chauvinism, this temporal distancing is misleading because it denies that these attitudes to the past are coeval, because it asserts a proper teleology of history, and because it characterizes the traditional as out of sync with this teleology.

Indeed, Tamil revivalist narratives invert this conceptual conjuncture of Western cultural forms, rationality, and modernity, locating scientific genius in the primordial Tamil past, and thereby "recovering" legitimacy for traditional, ancient practices. The assertions of siddha *vaidyas* that perfect medicine is to found in the Tamil past challenges the perspective of biomedical doctors who hold that the apex of scientific achievement is always deferred to an ever-receding global future. Their formulations of tradition also

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[9] Gustavo Benavides, "Modernity," in Taylor, 188.

[10] Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 74.

challenge an analytic of modernity in which innovation, tradition, and "contemporary timeliness" coexist only uneasily.

4.2 Models of Tamil Tradition

A central aim of Tamil nationalist leaders in the first half of the twentieth century was to fix the forms of tradition proper to Tamil society. Disputes around this issue largely splintered the movement. From the atheism of one of the leading cultural nationalists, E. V. Ramasami (E.V.R.), to the reform agenda of Maraimalai Adikal and his Shaiva Siddhanta movement, to the Congress Party's agenda to unify India under thinly-veiled Hindu symbols, each party claimed to have located the essence of Tamil society, discernable through the histories they created. Religion, or the lack thereof, was central to these formulations. The most radical separatist group, led by E.V.R., claimed that the character of the Tamil people was founded on rationality and science, and that Tamils would only realize their true selves by adopting atheism.[11] The Shaiva Siddhantins argued for a rational, egalitarian Tamil Hinduism that stresses a direct, unmediated relationship between the devotee and the divine. Both claimed to articulate the content of a non-brahman Tamil tradition, and both were central in formulating the character of Tamil revivalism which has served as a context for the legitimation of siddha medical practice. I will here consider E.V.R. and Maraimalai Adikal's formulations before turning to the medical discourses that are closely linked to these formulations.

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[11] It is not only Tamil revivalists who emphasize the scientific genius of the Tamils. Even those who celebrate the synthesis of Tamil and Sanskrit culture agree. Thus, P. T. Srinivasa Aiyangar, a brahman, writes "The genius of Tamil is marked by the scientific temperament; concrete ideas and images appeal to the Tamil people and hence Tamil is peculiarly fitted to be the vehicle of scientific knowledge. The genius of Sanskrit is marked by the philosophical temperament." Aiyangar, 85.

4.3 E. V. Ramasami's Atheism, Rationality, and the Demonization of Hinduism

E. V. Ramasami was born in 1879 into the Naiker caste, an elite land-owning shudra caste which follows rigid standards of purity with respect to non-land-owning communities. In 1904 he became a renouncer, wandering through pilgrimage sites in Northern India where he repeatedly witnessed, and was a victim of, caste discrimination. For instance, as a non-brahman he was denied lodging in many pilgrim rest houses in Varanasi. Disillusioned with the caste inequalities of Hinduism, he subsequently gave up the religious life and joined the Congress Party in 1919 to fight social inequality in Indian society.[12] In 1925, he left Congress after witnessing eating facilities in a Congress school which segregated non-brahmans from brahmans. In the same year, he started the Self-Respect League, declaring that "hereafter my work is to dissolve the Congress."[13]

E. V. R. 's leading position in the Self-Respect League established him as one of the most influential cultural critics of Aryan oppression of Dravidians. His primary target was Hinduism, which he saw as a brahman "scheme" (*cūḻcci*) to "make Aryans superior, to put other people in the dark so that they could be ruled for the benefit of the Aryan…"[14] E.V.R. viewed religion as a device used to uphold class inequality by masking social injustices and creating the impression that these injustices are a natural part of the social order. Hinduism "is founded by a small group for their own power

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[12] E. S. Visswanathan, *The Political Career of E. V. Ramasami Naicker: A Study in the Politics of Tamilnadu, 1920-1949* (Madras: Ravi and Vasanth Publishers, 1983), 20-23.

[13] Barnett, 37.

[14] "āriyarkaḷuṭaiya mēṉmaikku ākavum avarkaḷ maṟṟa makkaḷai antakārattil vaittut taṅkaḷukku aṉukūlamāka āṇṭu koḷvataṟku ākavum..." Tantai Periyār (E.V. Rāmasami), *Tamiḻar Tamiḻnāṭu Tamiḻarpaṇpāṭu* [The Tamil People, The Tamil Country, and Tamil Culture] (Cheṉṉai: Tirāviṭar Kaḻaka Veḷiyīṭu, 1996), 45-46.

interest and built on the ignorance, illiteracy and exploiting of the people."[15] Instead, E.V.R. offered "man and his wisdom rather than talk of God and his power."[16] In a 1947 speech, E.V.R. asserted that atheism and rationalism are a "scientific alternative to religion. Man's reason alone can further true progress."[17] He advocated scientific education as the means to spread rational principles.[18]

E.V.R. drew from, and contributed to, Tamil narratives of identity of the sort described in the prior chapter, in order to argue that religion in any form is foreign to Tamil culture. He held that while modern-day Tamils might think of themselves as Hindus, the genuine, central quality of Tamils is rationality, and their true, ancient position on religion that of atheism. "That is why I say that Tamils have no gods at all. The gods that they pray [to] are all the gods and deities of Aryans. . . *genuinely* Tamils have not accepted the four vedas as their scriptures." [italics mine][19] While many Tamils think of themselves as Hindus, their "gods and goddesses were imported from foreign soil."[20] "There had been no god, no temple, no holy place and no holy tank for the Tamils of ancient days. What are existing to be [sic] for the sake of the Tamils have been fabricated and institutionalized by Brahmins for the sake of their livelihood. They have

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[15] Anita Diehl, *E. V. Ramaswami Naicker-Periyar: A Study of the Influence of a Personality in Contemporary South India*, Lund Studies in International History 10 (Stockholm: Scandinavian University Books, 1977), 41.

[16] Diehl, 55.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid., 56. For more on the atheism of E.V.R., see Tiruchi V. Anaimuthu, *Contribution of Periyar E.V.R. to the Progress of Atheism* (Madras: Periyar Nul Veliyittakam, 1980).

[19] Periyar [E.V. Ramasami], *Is There a God? Selections From Periyar's Speeches and Writing* (Chennai: Emerald Publishers, 1996), 39. The four Vedas compose the corpus of Sanskrit texts often considered to be the core of Hinduism. For a scholarly perpetuation of this brahmanical bias, see Brian K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual, and Religion* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1989).

[20] Periyar, *Is There a God?*, 49.

done so, to maintain their religious hegemony and to keep us in perpetual subordination, besides fooling all of us."[21] Just as the foreign Aryans have no place of their own, are interlopers on Tamil soil, and must be expelled in order that true Tamil selfhood can be reestablished, likewise the Hindu beliefs and practices which they introduced are foreign and must be discarded.

E.V.R. located the primary source of social injustice in Tamil Nadu in ancient Sanskrit texts. In 1922, he first advocated the burning of *Manusmṛti* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, an act that he periodically carried out over the next several decades.[22] He also wrote widely distributed treatises on these two texts. These writings were to play a central role in twentieth century debates about the forms of knowledge appropriate to Tamil society.

4.3.1 The *Manusmṛti*

Brahmans, those most enfranchised in the legal and administrative colonial structures, asserted that their claims represented those of all Hindus. It was brahmans who elevated the *Manusmṛti* as the paradigmatic text of Hindu law, applicable to all Hindus. "The Anglo-Indian law in Madras was heavily influenced by centrist notions that Hindu culture was uniform and by Brahmanic notions, obtained from Brahman texts and Shastric [dharmashastra] texts, that this culture was Brahman. The Anglo-Indian courts thus imposed the classic Aryan caste system on to Tamil society as if it were its Tradition and then proceeded to maintain it there with the full force of the law and the modern state."[23] D.A. Washbrook's observation that the British considered brahmanical notions

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[21] Ibid., 45.

[22] Barnett, 37; Irschick, *Politics*, 339; Paula Richman, "E. V. Ramasami's Reading of the *Ramayana*," in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 175-76.

[23] D.A. Washbrook, "Caste, Class and Dominance in Modern Tamil Nadu: Non-Brahmanism, Dravidianism and Tamil Nationalism," in *Dominance and State Power in Modern India: Decline of a Social Order, Volume 1*, ed. Francine R. Frankel and M.S.A. Rao (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 241-42. See also Lloyd. I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

to be *the* tradition of all of Indian society highlights the contested nature of Tamil tradition and the stakes of the debate at this historical juncture. E.V.R. had reason to fear that *Manusmṛti* would become the centerpiece of an all-Indian justice system with independence from the British.

E.V.R.'s response to Manu is entitled *Manu -- A Code of Injustice to Non-Brahmans*.[24] He argues that far from embodying eternal laws, Manu is a book of rules, humanly authored and used to perpetuate caste inequalities. E.V.R. draws on the category of "non-brahman" to conceive of a coherent community of non-brahmans set against brahmans. He begins his treatise:

> Manu Dharma Shastra is the weapon of the high caste Brahmins. It has two main motives. First of all this enables the Brahmins to call themselves high and superior to others and lead a happy life without doing any work. It has made the sons of the soil (sudras) as slaves to them forever. The non-brahmins are deprived of their self-respect and decency. The second motive is to render injustice to all as stipulated in the Manu law. When such an order is set up permanently the organisations as the government, courts, constitutional acts, etc. would naturally be dominated and monopolised by the Brahmin community. Such an arrangement would render all others as slaves forever. This is the other motive of the Manu's code.[25]

Drawing on narratives of Tamil identity of the sort that I detailed in chapter two, E.V.R. naturalizes the relationship of non-brahmans to the Tamil soil, characterizing a community of non-brahmans who are the "sons of the soil." These indigenous non-brahmans have been enslaved by the foreign brahmans through the "weapon" of Sanskrit texts, texts which delude the Tamil people into accepting caste strictures. His language points to the eternal nature of the oppression by brahmans, who will always be foreigners on Tamil soil. He replaces the brahmanic discourse – which attempts to naturalize social

[24] Periyar E.V. Ramasami, "Manu -- A Code of Injustice to Non-Brahmans," in *Collected Works of Periyar E.V.R., Volume 1* (Madras: The Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, 1992 [1981]).

[25] Ramasami, *Collected Works, Volume 1*, 43.

relations into a hierarchical structure with brahmans on top – with one that equally naturalizes the same social relationships into a structure that inverts the brahmanic claims, insisting on an eternal social order in which the presence of brahmans on Tamil soil can only be interpreted as foreign oppression. Just as Manu employs a religious myth of creation to naturalize and legitimate a specific view of social relationships, so E.V.R. also employs a myth of Tamil origins to assert the eternal nature of his own social vision.

E.V.R.'s characterization of brahmans, based on these verses of *Manu*, was shaped by his social and political agendas. For example, brahman avarice was for him a racial trait that continued to manifest itself in brahman dominance of government employment. He also cites passages where brahmans have a monopoly on Vedic textual knowledge, mirroring their dominance of university education in the twentieth century. According to *Manu*'s political ideal, brahmanic authority was to be upheld through cooperation with royalty. E.V.R. suggests a parallel case where brahmanic Hinduism and state power are joined: the threatened rule of the Congress, a northern party of brahmans which would exploit caste distinctions in order to subjugate non-brahmans.

4.3.2 The *Rāmāyaṇa*

One of the most important and interesting of E.V.R.'s writings is his interpretation of Valmiki's Sanskrit *Rāmāyaṇa*. He describes Valmiki's hero Rama as an Aryan oppressor who unfairly destroys Ravana, the king of the Tamils, and his Tamil kingdom. He views the *Rāmāyaṇa* as the story of the destruction of a pristine, rational Dravidian civilization, which is replaced by a superstitious society marked by caste inequality.[26] E.V.R. employs the myth of the deluge to argue that Lanka, perhaps modern day Sri Lanka in Valmiki's text, was once contiguous with Tamil Nadu and therefore a site of

[26] Periyar E.V. Ramasami, *The Ramayana (A True Reading)* (Chennai: Dravidar Kazhagam Publications, 1998 [1959]), preface. Also see Richman.

Tamil civilization. He draws on the "scientific" authority of the deluge narrative to demonstrate the falseness of the claims that the *Rāmāyaṇa* took place at the crux of the Treta and Dvapara yugas, or in E.V.R.'s estimation, about 2,100,000 years ago.[27] E.V.R. refers to European research which theorized that a series of six great floods, occurring from 1,000,000 years ago to 5,000 years ago, radically changed the Earth's landscape. He argues that it was as a result of the last flood, in 3,000 B.C., that Sri Lanka became separated from Tamil Nadu.[28] If this is the case, he asks, and given that Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* speaks of Lanka as a separate island, how can the *Rāmāyaṇa* be 2,100,000 years old?[29] E.V.R. marshals scientific authority not only to undermine the story's ancientness, but also to "prove" that Lanka was formerly part of the Tamil land and its soil therefore Tamil soil.

First published in 1930 as *Irāmāyaṇap Pāttiraṅkaḷ* (*Characters of the Rāmāyaṇa*), E.V.R.'s critique was translated into English and published in 1959 as *The Ramayana (A True Reading)*.[30] The publisher's note to the first English edition asserts that E.V.R.'s conclusions "have been based on a 'true reading' of the Ramayana and not by a pious and biased reading as indulged in by the admirers of this stupid fable."[31] Here, fable is opposed to research, truth is opposed to myth, and piety is an orientation that biases and deludes. E.V.R.'s polemic ceaselessly portrays the texts as false. "It is clear that the Ramayana is not a story that ever took place. There is no history (carittiram) for it; it is

[27] Periyar E.V.R., *Irāmāyaṇak Kuṟippukaḷ (Ellām Ātāraṅkaḷaip Poṟuttē Tokukkappaṭṭavai)* [Notes on the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Compiled with All the Evidence)] (Tirucchi: Periyār Suyamariyātai Piracāra Niṟuvaṉa Veḷiyīṭu, 1972), 10.

[28] Ramasami, *Irāmāyaṇak Kuṟippukaḷ,* 13.

[29] Ramasami, *Irāmāyaṇak Kuṟippukaḷ,* 14.

[30] Periyar E.V.R., *Irāmāyaṇap Pāttiraṅkaḷ* [Characters of the Rāmāyaṇa] (Tirucchi: Periyār Suyamariyātai Piracāra Niṟuvaṉa Veḷiyīṭu, 1972 [1930]).

[31] Ramasami, *The Ramayana (A True Reading),* iii.

not consistent with knowledge or research. . . . There is no explanation for the place where the gods reside. There is no mention in geographical science of a world above the human world. And there is no elucidation of a route between the human world and the upper world!"[32]

Yet if the Ramayana is not true, wherein lies its power over Tamils? E.V.R. is acutely aware of the power of ideas and mythologies to conquer a people. Indeed, he asserts, the invasion of Aryans was far more ideological than physical.

> The Aryans, when they invaded the Dravidian country, made war with the Dravidians, who were the indigenous, ancient inhabitants (*paḻaṅkuṭi*) of that country. They persecuted the Dravidian people, and disgraced them. These are a few of the historical facts that expert research scholars have discovered. The Ramayana is the story of these events imagined and fabricated by the Aryans.[33]

The Ramayana is false history, opposed to the great research embodied by Western scholars and by E.V.R. himself. The story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* does not relate a true story of oppression -- it is itself the *instrument* of oppression.

> The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are the foremost of the Aryan propaganda fictions that were created to capture the Dravidians in the Aryan net and to degrade them, to make them people without self-respect or rationality (*pakuttaṟivu*), and to destroy their humanity. . . . For those who strive to examine the core of the book correctly and carefully, it will be clear that its contents are uncivilized and barbarian, that it is a very ordinary book, and that in it there is no edifying information or praiseworthy wisdom that people, especially our Tamil people, can learn. . . . It is clear that this myth (*kaṭṭukkatai*) was created out of the

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[32] "irāmāyaṇam naṭanta katai alla eṉpatu teḷivu. ataṟkuc carittiram illai; atu aṟivukkup poruttamāṉatākavō, ārāyccikkup poruttamānatō illai. tēvar, acurar. . . . ivarkaḷatu iruppiṭattiṟkum entavitamāṉa viḷakkamum kiṭaiyātu. pūlōkam eṉṟum, mēl lōkam eṉṟum kuṟippiṭṭiruppataṟkup pūkōḷa cāstiraṅkaḷil iṭam illai. pūlōkattiṟkum, mēl lōkattiṟkum viḷakkam illai. pōkku varavukku vaḻiyum illai!" Ramasami, *Irāmāyaṇak Kuṟippukaḷ*, 5.

[33] "ivvāriyarkaḷ tirāviṭa nāṭṭil pukunta kālaiyil, innāṭṭup paḻaṅkuṭi makkaḷākiya tirāviṭarkaḷōṭu pōrpurintu, tirāviṭa makkaḷaik koṭumaip paṭutti, iḻivupaṭuttiya cila carittira uṇmaikaḷait taṅkaḷ āttiram tīrumpaṭiyāṉa aḷavukkuk kaṟpaṉai ceytukāṭṭic cittarittiruppatē irāmāyaṇamāka miḷirkiṟatu eṉṟu ārāyccivallōr kaṇṭupiṭittuk kūṟiyiruppatu..." Ramasami, *Irāmāyaṇap Pāttiraṅkaḷ*, 14.

> imagination in order to raise up the brahmans, to assert Aryan principles, to destroy the Dravidian people, and to establish the rules of Manudharma varnashrama.[34]

These Aryan "fictions" play on the emotions of the undiscerning reader to instill in the Dravidian a sense of inferiority with respect to brahmans.

E.V.R. infuses notions of truth and deception in social identity, "racializing" truth as an inherent possession of particular communities and traditions. He neatly summarizes the Aryan racial character in his depiction of Rama.

> Rama, the hero of the Ramayana, is spoken of in such a way that the people will think he is an incarnation of god. However, the author of the story, Valmiki, describes Rama's thoughts, speech and actions as full of deceit, lies, cunning, artifice, violent-heartedness, greed, murder, drunkenness, flesh-eating, killing the innocent while hiding, terrorizing helpless women and innocent people, cowardice, and other evil qualities (*kuṇam*).[35]

"If one looks at the qualities of Rama, one sees that he entered the kingdom of innocent Tāṭakai [a demon who lived in the forests in the south], and cruelly killed her, only because she tried to stop the sacrifices which were performed in contravention to the laws of her kingdom."[36] E.V.R.'s depiction of Rama is not simply that of a single, literary

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[34] "tirāviṭa makkaḷai āriya valaiyil vīḻcceytu, avarkaḷait taṉmāṉamum pakuttaṟivum aṟṟavarkaḷāka ākki, maṉitattaṉmaiyai iḻakkacceyta āriyappiracārak kataikaḷil mutaṉmaiyāṉavai irāmāyaṇamum pāratamumākum. . . . ikkataikaḷiṉ mūlappiratikaḷ eṉpavaikaḷaic cariyāy, kavaṉamāy ārāyntu nōkkuvōrukku avaṟṟil kāṇum viśayaṅkaḷ peritum mika mika anākarikamāṉatum, kāṭṭumirāṇṭittaṉamāṉatum, veku cātāraṇamāṉatumākavē kāṇappaṭum eṉpatōṭu, ivaikaḷiliruntu makkaḷ, kuṟippāka nam tamiḻ makkaḷ, kaṟṟukkoḷḷakkūṭiya paṭippiṉaiyō, pārāṭṭattakka tattuvaṅkaḷō ētum illai eṉpatum pulaṉākum. eṉṟālum, avai yāvum pārppaṉar uyarvukkum, . . . āriyar koḷkaikaḷai valiyuṟuttit tirāviṭamakkaḷai iḻivu paṭuttuvataṟkum, maṉutarma varṇāccirama muṟaiyai nilainiṟuttuvataṟkum ākavē kaṟpaṉai ceyyappaṭṭa kaṭṭukkataikaḷ eṉpatum eḷitil viḷaṅkum." Ibid., 11.

[35] "katānāyakaṉāṉa irāmaṉaik kaṭavuḷiṉ avatāram eṉṟu makkaḷ karutavēṇṭum eṉpatākak karutiyē eḻutappaṭṭatākac collappaṭum inta irāmāyaṇak kataiyil, ataṉ āciriyar vālmīki eṉpavar irāmaṉuṭaiya eṇṇam, pēccu – naṭattai ākiyavaikaḷil vaṭcakam, poy, cūtu, cūḻcci, vaṉṉeṭcam, pērācai, kolai, matuvaruntal, māmicam pucittal, niraparātikaḷai maṟaintiruntu kollutal, apalaikaḷai kuṟṟamaṟṟavarkaḷaik koṭumai ceytal mutaliya tīya kuṇaṅkaḷum, kūṭā oḻukkaṅkaḷum, pēṭit taṉmaikaḷum ērāḷamākak kāṇappaṭumpaṭiyākap pala iṭaṅkaḷil eḻutiyirukkiṟār." Ibid, 17.

[36] "irāmaṉiṉ yōkkiyataiyaik kavaṉittāl, oru tavaṟum ceyyāta tāṭakaiyai, avaḷ irājyattil pukuntu, avaḷ irājyac caṭṭattiṟku virōtamāka naṭaiperra yākaṅkaḷait taṭaiceykirāḷ eṉṟa cākkuc collik kurūramāyk kollukiṟāṉ." Ibid., 77.

character, but a racial characterization as well, an enumeration of the central qualities that underlie the essence of a brahman race.

Unlike Rama, Ravana was "A great learned man, a great ascetic, a master of shastras and vedas, a merciful protector of his citizens and relatives, a brave man, a very strong man, a pure warrior..."[37] "If one asks why Ravana hated devars, rishis and munis, there is no reason other than because, in the name of sacrifice, they tormented and killed living beings. Even Valmiki said that Ravana was a good man, a great and beautiful man. He [Ravana] denounced brahmans only after seeing them performing sacrifices and drinking the intoxicating somarasam."[38] Ravana, the "civilized" and compassionate Tamil king, justifiably persecuted brahmans because of the cruel and perverse nature of their rituals.[39] The consideration of Rama and Ravana in E.V.R.'s work is an articulation of two community identities, one comprised of immoral Aryans, radically contrasted to another of moral, victimized Tamils.

4.3.3 Industry, science and tradition

E.V.R.'s attitude toward the past was ambivalent at best. One the one hand, he naturalized particular characteristics as essential to the Tamil people, formulating a somewhat generic, rational Tamil tradition. However, his criteria for what might be part of this tradition were based so rigidly on Western views of science that he was able to claim very little historical material for this rational Tamil tradition. "Ours is an obstinate society. Even after more than three-fourths of the people of the world have progressed,

[37] "makā kalvimāṉ; tavacirēśṭaṉ; vēta cāstira viṟpaṉṉaṉ; kuṭikaḷaiyum, cuṟṟattāraiyum irakkattuṭaṉ ātarittavaṉ; tairiyacāli; ati palacāli; cutta vīraṉ;..." Ibid., 67.

[38] "'tēvarkaḷaiyum, riśikaḷaiyum, muṉivarkaḷaiyum irāvaṇaṉ veṟuttāṉ' eṉṟāl, yākam eṉṉum peyarāl jīvaṉkaḷai vataittuk koṉṟu, ceyyum koṭiya kolaipātakak kāriyaṅkaḷukkāka veṟuttirukkiṟāṉē tavira, vēṟu kāraṇam illai. Itai vālmīkiyē, 'irāvaṇaṉ mikavum nallavaṉ; avaṉ perumai uṭaiyavaṉākavum pēraḻaku uṭaiyavaṉākavum viḷaṉkiṉāṉ. āṉāl, pirāmaṇarkaḷ yākam ceyvataiyum, cōmaracam aruntuvataiyum kaṇṭāl maṭṭum avarkaḷaik kaṇṭippāṉ' eṉṟu kūṟukiṟār." Ibid., 68.

[39] In the epic literature, sacrifices conducted by brahmans center on the sacrifice of animals.

our society is still in a backward and barbaric stage, adamantly following customs of yore, because they have been adopted for a long time by its forebears."[40] He was dismissive of any form of custom or ritual, and also impatient with romanticizing the past. He urged Tamils: "Don't think about past glory, see today's degradation."[41]

E.V.R. supported those cultural traditions, such as music or drama, which were not in direct contradiction to science. However, his critique of religion led him to disregard all practices that were counter to science and its institutions. Indigenous medical knowledge was one of his targets.

> Much earlier than the advent of allopathy and when belief in god, prayer, magic, mantra were in vogue, the average age of an individual was only 15 and after the debut of allopathy, it increased to about 60 or 70. . . . Are these [facts] not due to a scientific approach and deep knowledge? Only those who are blind and ignorant of these progress [sic] do believe in god.[42]

E.V.R. accepted the universal truth claims of allopathy, a position which left no room for acceptance of siddha medicine as efficacious or as worthy of support. Despite the "indigenous" nature of siddha medicine, E.V.R. viewed it as superstitious and therefore, like Hindu superstition, as an impediment to progress and so a cultural element to be discarded.

E.V.R.'s critique of Hinduism and brahmanic traditions, his refusal to glorify Tamil history in the view that such indulgence of past glory leads to present impotence, and his conviction that present Tamil culture had little of value because it was suffused with Aryan superstitions, led him to commend a model for the future of Tamil society that was based on the industrialized countries of Europe. He relentlessly compared the

[40] Ramasami, *The Ramayana (A True Reading)*, iv.

[41] Rāmasami, *Tamiḻar Tamiḻnāṭu Tamiḻarpaṇpāṭu*, 13.

[42] Ramasami, *Is There a God?*, 62.

progress of other nations to his own country, where "men believe only in rituals and ceremonies, in God, in religion and such other rubbish."[43] He pronounces a sort of creed of self in an introductory note to a collection of his writings: "I, E.V. Ramaswamy, have taken upon myself the task of reforming Dravidian Society so that it shall be comparable to other societies of the world, in esteem and enlightenment, and I am solely devoted to that service."[44] Deluded by the brahmanic program called Hinduism, and prevented from rational thought on account of belief in Hindu superstitions, Tamil society has fallen behind the progress of other countries. E.V.R.'s prescription was a large dose of Western, critical, rational education, calling for the development of a Tamil literature that is "far removed from religion and God, and a literature that is to do with irrefutable science."[45] His characterization of science and rationality as principles most valued by ancient Tamils allowed him to assert that the pursuit of a Tamil society along these lines was not an imitation of the British, but reestablished the "true" character of the Tamil "nation." At the same time, this "revival" of Tamil science would entail a radical transformation of Tamil society in accordance with European models.

Under E.V.R.'s leadership, Tamil non-brahman parties fared poorly at the ballot box. In elections in 1936, 1943, and through to the late 1960's, the Justice Party and its later incarnation, the Dravida Kalaham, was decisively defeated by the Congress. The non-brahman party, all agreed, was unable to secure sufficient mass support for electoral victory. Its leadership came almost entirely from the "forward" shudra castes, which composed 19% of the population of Tamil Nadu, while claiming to represent the

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[43] E.V. Ramasami, *The Revolutionary Sayings of Periyar*, trans. R. Ganapati (Madras: Department of Information and Public Relations, Government of Tamil Nadu, 1985), 15.

[44] Ibid., xl.

[45] Ibid., 49.

"backward" shudra castes (49%) and the untouchables (17%).[46] That the Justice Party spoke *about* these disenfranchised groups is clear; that they spoke *for* them is less clear, but such an argument might be made; that they persuasively spoke *to* them is clearly wrong, given their electoral defeat. This raises the question: Why was the Justice Party unpopular among the very populations it claimed to represent?

While there were certainly many factors limiting the appeal of Tamil revivalist political parties at this time, E.V.R.'s consistent formulation of Tamil identity as solely based on scientific sensibilities, and his rejection of all elements of religion and most traditional practices which were part of the everyday lives of most Tamils, must have played a part. He wrote: "Ours is an obstinate society. Even after more than three-fourths of the people of the world have progressed, our society is still in a backward and barbaric stage, adamantly following customs of yore, because they have been adopted for a long time by its forebears."[47] In his critique of contemporary Tamil society, and refusal to glorify the Tamil past, Ramasami harshly criticized modern Tamils as naive and blinded by superstition. He argued for a Tamil society based on rational principles, but he was also acutely aware that the reality of contemporary society was far different from his vision. E.V.R. recognized that a majority of Tamil speakers are in fact deeply affected by Hindu symbols and identify with Hindu ideals, lamenting, "I do not know for how many centuries our people have to wait for attaining reason and maturity. I have to believe that Tamil Nadu will have no salvation unless she is razed to her foundation by a catastrophic deluge or storm, a flood or an earthquake, and then renewed."[48]

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[46] Arooran, 52-53.

[47] Ramasami, *The Ramayana (A True Reading)*, iv.

[48] Ramasami, *Revolutionary Sayings*, 18-19.

It is little surprise that the Tamil speaking public responded more enthusiastically to and identified strongly with Congress notions of an Indian identity based on Hindu ideals. The repeated victories of the Congress in Tamil Nadu were won primarily in the rural areas, while the Justice Party vote was limited to an urban, educated constituency. With every electoral victory by Congress, uneducated rural communities attested that they identified themselves more as noble and ethical Hindus, forcefully repressed by the military might of Britain, than as non-Hindu Tamils, duped for so long by the superstitions perpetuated by brahmans. This failure of E.V.R.'s Justice Party to win popular votes demonstrates the limits of a too radical "invention" of tradition.

4.4 Maraimalai Adikal's Cultural Recoveries

Other formulations of a pure, ancient, and glorious Tamil tradition and essence have found more resonance with Tamil speakers. Maraimalai Adikal, one of the leaders of Shaiva Siddhanta in the twentieth century, vehemently attacked caste yet took a moderate stance on Hinduism, advocating its reform rather than its destruction.[49] Shaiva Siddhanta is a philosophical school centered on a corpus of Tamil texts and on monotheistic Shaivism. Shiva is considered by many to be the prototypical Tamil god, inscribed in a yogic position on a seal of the Indus Valley, material "proof" both that this civilization was a Tamil civilization, and also that the worship of Shiva among Tamils dates back to thousands of years before the common era.

The relationship between the Shaiva Siddhantins and members of E.V.R.'s Self-Respect Movement was extremely ambivalent. On the one hand, they were unified in their opposition to the Congress and in their attacks on brahmans and Sanskrit. However, E.V.R.'s strident atheism limited close ideological links between the two groups. In the *Dravidian*, a Self-Respect publication, E.V.R. wrote, "theism, faith in God, Hinduism

[49] Barnett, 32-34.

(both Saivism and Vaishnavism) all belong to the Aryan brahmins. Maraimalai Atikal who supports these is a slave of the Aryans. Only those who support atheism are genuine Tamils."[50] Yet others, usually from the Shaiva Siddhanta side, made attempts at reconciliation. Thus Ilavalaganar, a student of Adikal, wrote,

> Saivism is not one iota different from the primary aim of the self-respect movement. The self-respect movement arose to dispel the illusion of brahmanism from the Tamil people and infuse self-respect into them. Saivism also does the same. The self-respect movement detests the Aryan brahmins. Saivism too doesn't like the Aryan brahmins one bit.... The self-respect movement wishes to uplift the depressed classes. That is also the basic idea of Saivism... The self-respect movement is against caste differences among the Tamil people. Saivism too emphasizes the same point.... When there are so many common points, why should Saivism and Saivite apostles be deprecated and condemned?[51]

The two groups did cooperate in certain anti-brahman activities, especially in their defense of Tamil when Congress attempted to institute the mandatory study of Hindi in all schools in the Madras presidency in 1938.[52] Shaiva Siddhanta writings which celebrated the greatness of Tamil civilization preceded the founding of the Self-Respect Movement, and Adikal himself claimed that E.V.R.'s movement was based on his views and principles.[53] Even so, it is important to note that the two groups drew certain aspects of their formulations of Tamil identity from one another, and both asserted that the defining character of the Tamil people was that of intelligence and rationality.

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[50] Quoted in K. Sivathambi, "The Politics of a Literary Style and Ethnic Movement," in *Ethnic Movement in India, Theory and Practice,* ed. G. Palanithurai and R. Thandavan (Delhi: Kanishka Publishing House, 1993), 135.

[51] *Sentamil Selvi,* July-August, 1928, quoted in A.R. Venkatachalapathy, "Dravidian Movement and Saivites: 1927-1944," in *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 14 (April, 1995), 761.

[52] Ibid., 766.

[53] Ibid., 762.

In his English preface to *Tamiḻar Matam* (*Religion of the Tamils*), Adikal emphasizes the racial and cultural differences that divide Indian society. He employs the familiar distinction between Aryan and Dravidian and claims the autochthony of Tamils based on Indus archeology.

> Certainly there could have been at that remote period none but one Dravidian language spoken not only all over India but even beyond its frontiers, and that language could have been not other than Tamil which still lives among twenty million people in all of its literary glory and usefulness. Except Tamil no other Dravidian language possesses such vast, antique, varied, original, valuable literature. . . If Sir John Marshall had had a first hand knowledge of the Tholkappiam and some other ancient classics of Tamil, he would have easily shown in corroboration of what he stated as regards the pre-Aryan antiquity of one of the Dravidian languages, that Tamil alone, and not any other as he vaguely affirmed, must have been the language spoken and cultivated by the pre-Aryan inhabitants of the Indus valley. . . . We are now in a position strong and unshakable to correlate with the above archaeological evidence, the proofs afforded by the ancient and genuine literary works of the Tamil language.[54]

For Adikal, in addition to archeological "evidence," Tamil literary works, "ancient and genuine," can also serve as "proofs" for historical arguments. Adikal equates the authority of Tamil literature with that of science. Indeed, it was Sir John Marshall's ignorance of Tamil literature which led him to hedge on any specific indication of the identity of the Indus Valley people. The combination of the literary and the scientific is a more powerful force than science alone, a prevalent argument in the promotion of siddha medicine. Adikal argues that Tamil literature and culture are no less genuine, no less true, than the truths of science, and indeed, insofar as they are more ancient than science and can claim to occupy a more central place in formulations of Tamil identity, they supersede the authority of the most incontrovertible claims of science.

[54] Maṟaimalaiyaṭikaḷ, English Preface to *Tamiḻar Matam* [Tamil Religion] (Tirunelvēli: Teṉṉintiya Caivasittānta Nūṟpatippuk Kaḻakam, 1965), 13-14.

Adikal's story is the familiar one of the downfall of Tamil utopia. While ancient India was inhabited by a pure Tamil race, soon the Aryans, Muslims, and others from the North entered India and mixed with the Tamils, forming new mongrel races. These mongrel races are those presently found in North and Central India, while "the [Tamil] stock in the south has remained pure and intact."[55] What racial characteristics, however, distinguish the mixed races from the pure Tamil race? Adikal dismisses color, shape, and height as a proper basis for ethnic differentiation. Rather, "there might be seen at a glance a perceptible general characteristic running through them which marks off the Tamils from all other people who have come into India at different periods of time and settled. Many an acute student of ethnic studies has noted in the eyes and features of the Tamils a certain brightness and alertness due to a suffusion of superior intelligence which is naturally denied to others."[56]

Adikal contrasts Tamil intelligence, and the truth which Tamils seek, to the character of the Aryans, whose lack of a homeland, whose "fluidic condition, on account of their long nomadic life bred in them a disinclination for honest work and led them to live upon plunder and cattle-lifting."[57] Present day Tamilians are no longer attuned to rational arguments,

> having, for the last four or five centuries, come under the influence of the Aryan priesthood, [Tamils] have lost their independent and rational way of thinking and have become slaves to the Aryan laws, customs and manners.... Their observances of rites, of religious practices and social customs are formal and inflexible, for they care little to understand the significance of what they so strictly but unwittingly observe. This slavishness, this petrified conservatism has so thickened the gloom of their

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[55] Maṟaimalaiyaṭikaḷ, *Tamiḻar Matam*, 14.

[56] Maṟaimalaiyaṭikaḷ, *Tamiḻar Matam*, 16.

[57] Maṟaimalaiyaṭikaḷ, *Tamiḻar Matam*, 17-18.

> ignorance as to render them thoroughly impervious to the ray of light coming from the critical and historical spirit of the modern culture.[58]

Modern culture is just one way to liberate Tamil society from the evils of Aryan religion. Another way is through a close reading of ancient Tamil literature, which unlike Aryan Sanskrit texts, "depict nature and human nature as they truly appear."[59] But the best approach is one which will integrate the study of Tamil literature with modern, scientific research.

> The ancient Tamil works describe things as found in real life. . . . Because of a critical and deep study of the ancient Tamil classics and the tenets of the Saiva Siddhanta by the Tamils, the evil Aryan influences on Tamil and the Tamils have begun to fade away. The great researches conducted by Western scholars in Tamil and the study of English have greatly helped in exploding the myth of Aryan superiority and wiping out the evil traces of Aryan way of life among the Tamils.[60]

For Adikal, the religion of the Aryans promotes violent sacrifices, rituals "revolting and barbaric to the Tamilian mind..."[61] He focuses his critique on brahmanic ritual, as this is the sphere in which brahmans assert their monopoly on religious performance. Indeed, it is through temple, marriage, death, and other rituals that brahman priests gain their livelihood. Because these rituals are conducted in Sanskrit, brahmans claim an exclusive right to perform them. Unlike E.V.R., however, Adikal was not against the performance of ritual *per se*, but rather objected to the *monopolization* of ritual by brahmans, and so he engaged non-brahman ritual specialists (Saivakkurukkals) on various occasions.[62]

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[58] Maṟaimalaiyaṭikaḷ, *English Preface to Māṇikkavācarkar Varalāṟum Kālamum* [The History and Times of Manikkavacarkar] (Tirunelvēli: Teṉṉindiya Caivasittānta Nūṟpatippuk Kaḻakam, 1957 [1930]), 16.

[59] Maṟaimalaiyaṭikaḷ, *Māṇikkavācarkar Varalāṟum Kālamum*, 16.

[60] Maraimalai Adigal, *Can Hindi be the Lingua Franca of India?* (Madras: South India Saiva Siddhanta Works, 1969), 18.

[61] Maṟaimalaiyaṭikaḷ, *Tamiḻar Matam*, 20.

[62] Sivathambi, 124-25.

While for E.V.R. the measure of civilization was solely determined by its conformity with rational principles, Adikal includes religious sensibility. According to Adikal, ancient Tamil society was one in which religious dissension was non-existent. Different schools of thought about religion did not exist, and there was little conscious reflection on religious belief. The Tamils, simply, absolutely, and unanimously, "were paying their worship to the one Almighty." Religious dissension was only later "brought by the Brahmins and introduced into Southern India by the aid of Sanscrit in the three centuries preceding the Christian era. . . . Before this intrusion of the northern people, all the cultured and civilized Tamils were as a body strict monotheists paying their worship only to Siva as the almighty God of the universe and therefore had no occasion to bring in any religious or philosophic discussion among them."[63] For Adikal, and here one can hear echoes of missionary critiques of polytheistic, superstitious Hinduism, monotheism is the most rational form of religion, entirely in agreement with scientific sensibilities.

Adikal's method of inquiry can be characterized as a sort of scientific spiritualism in which people "think for themselves and examine their beliefs in the light of reason."[64] While lesser civilizations come up with religions of fancy, illusion, or deception, the genius of Tamil culture, he asserts, has been to develop a religion of truth, a truth ascertained in its adherence to reason. The "ancient Tamilians" had "intuitive perception of the existence of God in light and fire aided, of course, by an acute discriminative understanding...."[65] "Strongly convinced therefore of the existence of such an infinite being, the acute intelligence and the highly developed instincts of the ancient Tamils anxiously set out to search for the principle in which it could reside in a way perceptible

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[63] Maṟaimalaiyaṭikaḷ, *Tamiḻar Matam,* 24.

[64] Maṟaimalaiyaṭikaḷ, *Vēḷāḷar Nākarikam* [Vēḷāḷar Civilization] (Tirunelvēli: Teṉṉindiya Caivasittānta Nūṟpatippuk Kaḻakam, 1963 [1923]), 11.

[65] Maṟaimalaiyaṭikaḷ, *Tamiḻar Matam,* 34.

to the outer and inner vision of man."[66] While temporarily deluded by the false Aryan religion, Tamils can restore their relationship to truth and reestablish their utopian society by returning to ancient Tamil religion. "All Tamils must abandon worshipping the multitudinous gods and goddesses and deified heroes and return to the monotheistic belief of their ancestors and worship only the one almighty God Siva."[67]

Adikal's argument for the authority of his monotheistic vision, both as the historical legacy of the Tamil people and as the universal, true account of existence, is based in part on his assertion that Tamil literature has a legitimacy on par with that of modern science. Drawing on utopian histories of Tamil civilization, Adikal promotes the authority of Tamil literature by characterizing the Tamil language as the primary language of the world and the only "natural" language in human history. In Adikal's published objection to mandatory Hindi education, the publisher's note provides the utopian context of Adikal's subsequent argument.

> Lemuria, a continent south of the Kumari river and mountain, submerged in the Indian Ocean, was the original home of man. Tamil was the language spoken by the people there. God Siva, in the form of Sivalingam, representing the tapering tongue of fire or Light was worshipped by the Lemurians. When Lemuria got submerged, the people there escaped to the north, east and west of India and the world. So, Tamil, the Tamils and their religion spread through the length and breadth of the world. Now these facts, testified to by great Historians and archeologists, have to be borne in mind in attempting to forge the unity of India and the world by the adoption of a common tongue for India (and the world).[68]

Adikal argues that the Tamil language, because it was the original language of humankind, is the appropriate lingua franca not only of India but of the entire world.

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[66] Ibid., 33.

[67] Ibid., 47.

[68] Maraimalai Adigal, *Can Hindi be the Lingua Franca of India?*, publisher's note.

Tamil is the language of utopia, the original language, the primordial language. The "new tongues" such as English are of "artificial and external beauties," and are "no match for the ancient Tamil tongue of rare worth and rarer works." Sanskrit, though ancient, is a language of falsity and deception, and Hindi is both superficial in its recent development and false in its descent from Sanskrit.

Adikal intimately ties the nature of particular languages with the character of corresponding cultures and the qualities of societies. For example, he holds that the harmony of ancient Tamil society led to the Tamil language being free of dialects, a perfectly uniform language in all times and places in which it has been spoken. In contrast, Hindi was formed in a society ridden with internal and external conflicts and thus is fragmented and divided.[69] Languages for him not only *reflect* the qualities of society but they also *reproduce* societies, so that fragmented Hindi as a lingua franca can only lead to a divided India, while Tamil, unified and unifying, will form the basis of a great India free of disagreement and disparity. Ancient Tamil literature will then be accessible to all people, leading to an India characterized by "worship of the one Supreme God, Siva, love of all living creatures, condemn meat-eating [sic], drinking of intoxicants, worship of minor deities, observing caste distinctions, etc." This is in opposition, of course, to "Aryan books that induce people to do the evil things enumerated above [i.e., meat-eating, drinking, caste observances]."[70]

In contrast to modern linguistic theory, which points to the arbitrary and conventional nature of language, Adikal argues that Tamil is a perfect, natural language, corresponding in an organic, physically appropriate, consubstantial way to the reality it describes.

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[69] Ibid.,12.

[70] Ibid., 17.

> At a time when people were not producing sound, sound was naturally (*iyaṟkaiyāka*) being produced. The first sound was "Om." Listen to the ocean, and you will hear "om." Or, try blowing on a conch, and see what sound is audible. . . . Even if one focuses internally, this sound "om" is clearly perceptible. From the time when there were no people, there has been a sound in nature, and it has been, naturally, this sound "om." One can see this even today."[71]

Furthermore, "The world was born only from this sound 'om.' This sound 'om' is the great possession of Tamil. . . . And Tamil is great because of this sound 'om.' It was the Tamil people and no other who first discovered (*kaṇṭuppiṭittavarkaḷ*) the sound 'om.'"[72] According to Adikal, phonic Tamil is not arbitrary but is based on a real, physical correspondence with the sound of nature. It is mimetic, formed in imitation of nature, and in this way differs from the "artificial" new languages, which are arbitrary and conventional. Adikal's claim that "om" is an exclusive Tamil possession counters the importance of "om" in early Sanskrit literature, and his theory of language similarly reflects much older, again Sanskritic, theories of the creative power of mantras. His characterization of Tamil tradition as unique in both its content ("om") and its form (as co-emergent with nature) is an attempt to overwrite a history in which Tamil and Sanskrit traditions developed together.

Adikal recounts a story that attests to the physical nature of Tamil and its material effects.

> In my youth, I would recite the [Sanskrit] Vedas. After reciting, blood would flow from my mouth. I went to many doctors to discover what the

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[71] "makkaḷ ōcaiyai uṇṭākkāta kālattil iyaṟkaiyākavē ōcai uṇṭāyiṟṟu. mutaṉ mutalil ēṟpaṭṭa ōcai 'ōm' eṉpatākum. kaṭalōcaiyaip pāruṅkaḷ, 'ōm' eṉṟu kēṭkum. caṅkai ūtippārttuk kātil vaittup pāruṅkaḷ. . . . uḷ nōkkip pārttālum inta 'ōm' ōcai naṉku pulaṉākum. makkaḷ illāta kālattiliruntu iyaṟkaiyiṉiṭam ōcai iruntatōṭu ippōtum anta 'ōm' eṉṟa ōcai iyaṟkaiyiṉiṭam iyaṟkaiyāy iruntu varukiṟatu. itai ippōtum pārkkalām." Maṟaimalaiyaṭikaḷ, *Tamiḻiṉ Taṉic Ciṟappu* [The Unique Greatness of Tamil] (Ceṉṉai: Pāri Nilaiyam, 1959 [1951]), 12.

[72] "ulakam 'ōm' eṉṟa ōcaiyiliruntutāṉ piṟantatu. inta 'ōm' eṉṟa ōcaiyāṉatu tamiḻukku mikavum ciṟapputaiyatu. . . . tamiḻ moḻiyāṉatu 'ōm' eṉṟa ōcai oliyāl taṉic ciṟappuṭaiyatu. 'ōm' eṉṟa ōcaiyai mutaṉ mutalil kaṇṭu piṭittavarkaḷ tamiḻarkaḷē allāmal piṟar allar." Ibid., 13.

> reason was for the bleeding. The doctors gave many different answers. For every doctor there was a different answer. I didn't understand it at all. When I'd recite Sanskrit shlokas in the morning, I would become depressed. As soon as I would wake up and recite them, my body would become very weak. After a half an hour, I would recite Tamil songs. Then my sadness would disappear, and I would be happy. One doctor told me to stop reciting the [Sanskrit] Upanishads and Vedas for fifteen days. I stopped reciting the Upanishads and the Vedas and only sang Tamil. Then the blood stopped! From that time, I decided that Sanskrit is the 'blood language.' I did some research into the reasons for this difference. Tamil is the language of the great ascetics. Tamil words are constructed in such a way that the strength of our bodies will not dissipate.[73]

As Tamil is a natural language, the use of Tamil is not antagonistic to the body. So, Adikal does not speak metaphorically when he proclaims that "Mother Tamil (*Tamiḻttāy*) protects us. Mother Tamil is not seduced by others. Tamil ceaselessly protects us!"[74] He means this literally, that the physical well-being of the Tamils depends on the continuation of their relationship with Tamil. In addition to being the language of truth, of science, and of social unity, Tamil is the also the language of health, a view that is taken up by siddha *vaidyas* in justifying their knowledge.

While Adikal holds that the perfection of Tamil derives from the purity of ancient Tamil society, free of foreign influence, he does not limit the usefulness of Tamil to Tamil culture. Tamil's strict accordance with the principles of nature makes it the language best suited for modern scientific expression, which he saw as also rooted in

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[73] "iḷamaiyil nāṉ vētaṅkaḷai uruppōṭṭatuṇṭu. uruppōṭṭapiṉ vāyiliruntu irattam irattamāka varum. ippaṭi irattam varuvataṟku mūlakāraṇam eṉṉa eṉṟu maruttuvar palaraik kēṭṭēṉ. maruttuvarkaḷ ētētō kāraṇaṅkaḷaic coṉṉārkaḷ. ovvoru maruttuvarum ataic cey itaic cey eṉṟārkaḷ. eṉakku oṉṟumē puriyavillai. samskiruta slōkaṅkaḷaik kālaiyilē uruppōṭuvatu eṉakkut tuṉpamākattāṉ iruntatu. kālaiyilē eḻuntu uruppōṭṭavuṭaṉ uṭampilē valuvillāmal pōyiṟṟu. arai maṇi nēram varai tamiḻp pāṭalkaḷai ōtivantēṉ. appoḻutu tuṉpamēyillai. iṉpamē iruntatu. oru maruttuvar eṉṉaik kālaiyil ōtukiṉṟa upaniśitattaiyum, vētattaiyum patiṉaintu nāṭkaḷ varai niṟutti vaikkac coṉṉar. upaniśitattaiyum, vētattaiyum niṟuttivaittut tamiḻaiyē ōtinēṉ. appōḻutu irattam varavillai! Atiliruntu camaskirutam 'iratta moḻi' eṉṟu muṭivu ceytēṉ. tamiḻukkum camaskirutattiṟṟkum inta vēṟupāṭirukkak kāraṇam eṉṉa eṉṟu ārāycci ceytēṉ. tamiḻmoḻi aruntavattōr moḻi. nam uṭampilē uḷḷa āṟṟal aḻintu pōkātapaṭi tamiḻc coṟkaḷ amaintirukkiṉṟaṉa." Ibid., 23-24.

[74] "tamiḻttāy nammaik kākkiṟāḷ. tamiḻttāy piṟarukku mayaṅkāḷ. nammaip pātukākka muṉaintu niṟpatu tamiḻ!" Ibid., 21.

nature. As Yogi Shuddhananda Bharati exclaims in his forward to Adikal's polemic against Hindi, if we consider Tamil's "fertility to produce new works in tune with the time spirit, taking into consideration its vitality to measure the heights of Scientific technology, we can very well maintain the invincible capacity of Tamil to develop into a universal language...."[75] As the language of nature, science, and universal truth, Tamil is also eternal. "Tamil will never be destroyed. Those who seek to destroy Tamil will themselves be destroyed. Tamil was born and developed rooted in nature. No one can destroy nature. Therefore, no one can destroy Tamil."[76]

Adikal argues that the world needs a lingua franca, because "unless a common language comes to be spoken and written and cultivated, real unity among people cannot be imagined to come forth." As the original language of humankind, the language of nature and the language of human harmony, Tamil is best suited to this globalizing task, but first it must be restored to its original state.[77] Adikal is most often considered to be the founder of the "Pure Tamil" (*ta<u>n</u>it Tami<u>l</u>*) movement to purify Tamil of Sanskrit influence, and thereby to restore it to its ancient glory and full scientific potential.[78] This project did not only consist in the expunging of "foreign" words from Tamil, but also the formulation of new, "pure" Tamil words to describe scientific knowledge and technological developments.[79] Adikal's formulation of Tamil tradition is not simply a

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[75] Maraimalai Adigal, *Can Hindi be the Lingua Franca of India?*, 4.

[76] "tami<u>l</u> entak kālattum a<u>l</u>iyātu. tami<u>l</u>ai a<u>l</u>ippata<u>r</u>kuk kaṅkaṇam kaṭṭupavarkaḷ tāmākavē a<u>l</u>intu pōvārkaḷ. iya<u>r</u>kaiyilē pi<u>r</u>antu vaḷarntatu tami<u>l</u>. ātalāl, iya<u>r</u>kaiyai yārum a<u>l</u>ikka muṭiyātu. ākavē, tami<u>l</u>aiyum a<u>l</u>ikka muṭiyātu." Ma<u>r</u>aimalaiyaṭikaḷ, *Tami<u>l</u>i<u>n</u> Ta<u>n</u>ic Ci<u>r</u>appu*, 20.

[77] Maraimalai Adigal, *Can Hindi be the Lingua Franca of India?*, 31.

[78] Shivathamby, 116.

[79] This was a project that the Self-Respect League and the Shaiva Siddhantins shared. E.V.R. called for the development of Tamil literature that is "far removed from religion and God, and a literature that is to do with irrefutable science." Ramasami, *Revolutionary Sayings*, 49. Cami Citamparanar, a leading figure in the Self-Respect League, advocated that the scope of literature in Tamil, until then dominated by works on religion, be extended to include "modern sciences": biology, economics,

hopeful and pleasant fantasy, but it also gives Tamils something to do, a project to engage in – it demands "working" with tradition.

This celebration of the Tamil language led Adikal to exalt Tamil literature and those forms of knowledge that he characterized as traditional. As we have seen, he considered Tamil literature to carry an authority that surpasses that of science. Likewise, he extolled Tamil Shaiva philosophy and poetry as products of the genius of ancient Tamil society. And finally, he advocated that Tamils patronize siddha medicine. Because siddha medicine is considered to be based on ancient Tamil manuscripts, it shares the qualities that he attached to both Tamil language and Tamil literature. According to this rhetoric, siddha medicine was the medical system of Lemuria, profound in its ancient wisdom, borne of the soil of utopia, perfect in its correspondence to nature, effective in its rational structure, and true in its scientific basis. These characteristics, then, have become the criteria through which those adhering to an ideology of the traditional defend their beliefs and practices against those others who challenge them, whether ayurvedic brahmans or European allopaths.

4.5 The Science of Siddha Medicine

Throughout the twentieth century, proponents of Tamil tradition have considered siddha medicine to be a central part of this story of the rational and scientific nature of the Tamil people. They characterize siddha as an ancient and indigenous Tamil science distinct from ayurveda, which they describe as "Sanskrit medicine" and thus as false, misleading, and superstitious. These writers also promote siddha medicine vis-à-vis allopathy, which they consider to be true insofar as it is scientific, but still inferior to

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chemistry, etc., a prescription repeated by many others. And a Tamil pundit and Self-Respect member tried to introduce reform on the legislative level, proposing that Tamil literature be purged of the devotional Tamil puranas, and that temple festival funds be diverted to Tamil schools with a rationalist agenda. Arooran, 166-67. Also see K. Kailasapathy, "The Tamil Purist Movement: A Re-Evaluation," in *Social Scientist* 7.10 (May, 1979): 23-51; and Sivathambi.

siddha medicine in its relatively recent origin, in its foreignness, and in its absolute dependence on the empirical method. Siddha medicine has been taken up fervently as the paragon of ancient Tamil "science" and is now supported, thought far less than biomedicine, by state and national governments.

Proponents of siddha medicine take up Adikal's call to employ Tamil literature in the revival of tradition. Tamil palm leaf medical manuscripts, attributed to the siddhars and were probably authored sometime around the 15th century, have become central in the reformulation of the siddha medical tradition. Much older literature is also cited as testifying to the ancientness of siddha medicine and to the scientific nature of the Tamil literary corpus. The *Tirukkuṟaḷ* occupies pride of place in this regard. It has characteristics that make it uniquely suited for this project: it contains almost no references to divine beings, is considered to be humanly authored, and is primarily concerned with ethical rather than devotional conduct. The *Tirukkuṟaḷ* even appealed to E.V.R., for whom the Kural "is impelled by ideas that are in accordance with practical knowledge, and in tune with Nature and Science... The author of the Kural did not accept God, Heaven and Hell. You could find only virtue, wealth and love in the Kural."[80] A siddha textual scholar sees the essence of siddha medicine contained in the *Tirukkuṟaḷ*, which "addresses itself without regard to caste, people or beliefs, to the whole community of mankind. It formulates sovereign morality based on reason. . . . The important and fundamental principles of the Siddha system of medicine are embedded in the Tirukkural."[81]

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[80] Ramasami, *Revolutionary Sayings*, 50-51.

[81] Madhavan. *Siddha Medical Manuscripts in Tamil*, 10.

Echoing Adikal's depiction of Tamil as the only natural language, Es. Kē. Es. Kāḷimuttup Piḷḷai, a registered practitioner of Indian medicine, claims that Tamil is both the oldest and the only natural language in the world.

> It is known through research that what is natural to people – the Tamil language and siddha medicine which is Tamil medicine – must have been prevalent throughout the [ancient] world. The evidence for this is that Tamil is the language which resounds with nature. The best of all animals is the cow... Calves of cows which are abundant in Tamil Nadu today, and calves of cows of foreign countries, think of their mothers and cry only "ammā"! They don't cry "mother" in English which is the language of foreign countries, nor do they cry "mātā" in Hindi, the North Indian language which is now stirring up language controversy. Therefore, that Tamil is the mother tongue that resounds with nature is not just something I say but a fact that everyone can agree with... Because Tamil was the only language that corresponded to original nature at the time of the world's creation, all the people of the world must have taken it as their mother tongue. After that, with changes due to the grip (*vacam*) of time, other languages must have emerged, taking the sounds of eminent Tamil as their basis. I say this with authority based on the conclusions of my research.[82]

The natural language of people is Tamil, and the natural medicine of people is siddha, because both correspond absolutely to nature. Like the Tamil language, Tamil tradition is *the* natural tradition, not one tradition among many. It adheres to nature because it emerges from nature. Tamil tradition and siddha medicine are therefore not only unique and original but also universal because they precisely correspond to *real* nature. Indeed, V.R. Madhavan, a Tamil scholar, even holds that the language itself has healing qualities.

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[82] "makkaḷukku iyaṟkaiyāṉatu, tamiḻ moḻi, tamiḻ vaittiyamākiya citta maruttuvam eṉṉum ivai ulakam muḻumaiyum iruntirukka vēṇṭum eṉpatai ārāycciyāl aṟiyavēṇṭiyatu. ataṟkuc cāṉṟu tamiḻ iyaṟkaiyil olikkum moḻi eṉpatu, vilaṅkiṉattil uyarvāṉatu pacu... ippoḻutuḷḷa tamiḻ nāṭṭiṉ parappaḷavil uḷḷa pacuvum maṟṟa veḷināṭṭiluḷḷa pacuvum īṉṟa kaṉṟukaḷ ammā eṉṟutāṉ taṉ tāyai niṉaintu kattukiṟatu. veḷi nāṭṭiluḷḷa moḻiyākiya āṅkilattil matar eṉṟō allatu ippoḻutu moḻip pōrāṭṭam ceytu koṇṭirukkum vaṭa nāṭṭu moḻiyil oṉṟākiya hintiyil mātā eṉṟō kattuvatillai. āṉāl iyaṟkaiyōṭu olikkum tāymoḻi tamiḻ eṉpatu nāṉ eṭuttuk kūṟāmalē ellōrum oppukkoḷḷak kūṭiyatu... ulakam uṇṭāṉa kālattil ulakam muḻutum makkaḷ mutal mutal iyaṟkaiyil olikkum moḻi tamiḻtāṉ eṉpatai yāymoḻiyākak koṇṭirukka vēṇṭum. ataṉ piṉ kāla vacattāl māṟupaṭṭu śrī tamiḻ moḻiyiṉ oliyai ātāramākak koṇṭu vēṟu moḻikaḷ uṇṭāyirukka vēṇṭum eṉpatu eṉatu ārāycciyiṉ muṭivu eṉṟu aṟutiyiṭṭu uṟuti kūṟukiṉṟēṉ." Es. Kē. Es. Kāḷimuttup Piḷḷai, R.I.M.P., "Cittar Tiṟaṅkaḷ" ["The Powers of the Siddhars"], 64-65.

"Tamil means Amiltam (Ambrosia) and as one takes amiltam it will bring bliss to oneself. Amiltam or Nectar is also a restorative and reviving medicine towards diseases. Logically the language itself is a medicine."[83]

In celebrating the eminence of siddha medicine, *vaidyas* cite the natural intelligence of the Tamil people. "Characteristically, Tamils are lively researchers. They are eminent thinkers. Their hypotheses, abilities, and knowledge are amazing. One can even call them the brain of the world."[84] Siddha *vaidyas* claim the essential "Tamil-ness" of their knowledge, its appropriateness for the Tamil people, its correspondence to the qualities of the Tamil community, and its autochthony in the Tamil land. Traditions, as well as people, can emerge from a particular local. At the same time, the characteristics that make this knowledge specifically Tamil are characteristics which justify its universal application: its durability, its rationality, and its adherence to natural laws.

The characters which Tamil revivalists assign to various traditions – Tamils are rational, Aryans are deceitful, the British are materialistic, and Muslims are carnivores – are read into medical practice. R. Kasturi speaks of the treatment of damaged organs. Biomedical doctors do transplants, or use artificial organs, corresponding to the propensity of the West to discard the old (i.e., tradition) in favor of the new (i.e., innovation). Biomedical doctors focus only on material realities, believing that if the damaged material is replaced by healthy material, health will be restored. The ayurvedic doctor, on the other hand, applies medicine that misleadingly appears to effect a cure, while the organs remain damaged. Again, medicine imitates culture, ethnic character, and history, for as we have seen, illusion and superstition lie at the heart of the character of

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[83] Madhavan. *Siddha Medical Manuscripts in Tamil*, 2-3.

[84] "tamiḻarkaḷ iyalpākavē cuṟucuṟuppu niṟainta ārāycciyāḷarkaḷ. uyarnta cintaṉaiyāḷarkaḷ. avarkaḷuṭaiya yūkamum, āṟṟalum, aṟivum viyakkattakkavai, ivarkaḷai ulakattiṉ mūlai eṉavum kūṟalām." Ṭākṭar Ciṟcapai, "Citta Vaittiyattiṉ Ciṟappum Ataṉ Tēvaiyum" ["The Excellence of Siddha Medicine and Its Importance"], in *Iraṇṭām Ulakattamiḻ Mānāṭu*, 78.

Aryans. "According to ayurveda, the reasons for the occurrence of disease are god's will, fate, the anger of the gods, or sins committed in past lives."[85] Unani (Islamic) practitioners give medicine made from animal organs, reflecting an often-cited stereotype of the Muslim as carnivore due to their consumption of beef. Siddha medicine, on the other hand, effects permanent relief, cutting disease at its root. Who would expect less from a culture that attempts to recover, rather than discard, the value of old things, whether traditions or organs? "Therefore, these other medical systems do not give the final, true causes [of disease]. The causes given in siddha medicine are in accordance with reason."[86] "Once a patient is cured according to the siddha medical system, that disease will never return. Siddha medicine cuts disease at its root."[87]

Siddha medicine cuts disease at its root is because it is the root of all medicines. Of the medicines currently practiced in the world, "English medicine (allopathy) and German medicine (homeopathy) are the most influential and are used by common people. But do these medicines cut at the root all diseases that appear in the body? Do they destroy suffering and give happiness? If one ponders this, it is clear that they do not."[88] Ilā. Kiruṭṭiṇamūrtti links allopathy and homeopathy to particular communities, undermining their claims to universal status. Because these have not been successful at

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[85] "āyurvēta muṟaiyiṉpaṭi nōykaḷ uṇṭākak kāraṇaṅkaḷ kaṭavuḷiṉ kaṭṭaḷai, talaiviti, teyvaṅkaḷiṉ kōpam, muṟpiṟappil ceyta pāvam; eṉpatākum." Kastūri.

[86] "āyurvēta muṟaiyiṉpaṭi nōykaḷ uṇṭākak kāraṇaṅkaḷ kaṭavuḷiṉ kaṭṭaḷai, talaiviti, teyvaṅkaḷiṉ kōpam, muṟpiṟappil ceyta pāvam; eṉpatākum. maṟṟa maṟaikaḷ kāraṇaṅkaḷai aṟutikaṭṭik kūṟuvatu illai; muṉpu kūṟiyapaṭi citta maruttuvak kāraṇaṅkaḷ viṭṭāṉattiṟku ottatāy irukkiṉṟaṉa." Ibid.

[87] "citta marutuva muṟaipaṭi cikiccai ceyyappaṭṭa nōyāḷikku enta nōykkākac ceyyappaṭṭatō anta nōy tirumpa varuvatu illai. ēṉeṉṟāl citta maruntu nōyiṉ kāraṇattai aṟavē eṭuttuviṭukiṟatu ." Ibid.

[88] "peruñcelvākkup (influence) peṟṟu perumpāṉmaiyōrāl payaṉpaṭṭuttappaṭṭu varuvatu āṅkilēyariṉ maruttuvamum (allopathy) cermāṉiyariṉ (Homeopathy) maruttuvamumē yākum. immaruntukaḷ uṭalil tōṉṟum ellāp piṇikaḷaiyum vēraṟak kaḷaintu maṉitaṉiṉ tuṉpam nīkki, iṉpa ākkam tarukiṉṟatā? eṉa orntāl avaiyillaiyātal pulaṉākiṟatu." Ilā. Kiruṭṭiṇamūrtti, "Citta Maruntum Iṉṟaiya Ulakum" ["Siddha Medicine and the World Today"], in *Iraṇṭām Ulakattamiḻ Māṉāṭu Citta Maruttuva Karuttaraṅku Ciṟappu Malar* [Second World Tamil Conference, Siddha Medicine Seminar Special Souvenir] (Chennai, 1968), 98.

curing diabetes, T.B., and other chronic illnesses, the author asks, "have those [medical systems] understood basic, essential medical details, such as the natural classifications of the structure of the human body, the details of that structure, and the natural bases of those classifications? Without a doubt we can see they have not."[89] He includes ayurveda and unani to his list of medicines that do not clearly understand "the nature of disease, the reasons for the onset of disease, the medicines that can remove disease, the supplements that make medicine effective, and the time to give medicines... Is there not a single medical system that can cure all diseases fully?"[90]

He answers in the affirmative, that medical system being one that comes "from our Tamil Nadu," the medical system that is the "mother" (*tāy*) of ayurveda and unani, that is, "siddha medicine," or "Tamil medicine."[91] Siddha is ancient, at least 5000 years old, and attends to more than the body, looking at the heart (*uḷḷam*) and soul (*uyir*). Thus siddha *vaidyas* can cure all ailments. Today's Western experts (mēlai maruttuva vallunarkaḷ) do not know how to stop disease because they do not attend to the heart (*uḷḷam*) and soul (*uyir*).[92] "*Uḷḷam*" literally means that which is internal, and more specifically refers to both heart and mind. "*Uyir*" is most simply "life," but in its more active sense it is that which animates things, the "life breath" of things. Because Western doctors do not consider *uḷḷam* and *uyir* to be important, they are inadequate in their understanding of nature. Western science sees the world as dead matter, and so it is itself

[89] "ivaikaḷ maṉitaṉiṉ uṭal amaippu paṟṟiya iyaṟkaip pakuppukaḷ, amaippiṉ viparaṅkaḷ, pakuppukkaḷiṉ iyaṟkai mūlaṅkaḷ ākiya aṭippaṭai maruttuva tēvaikaḷai kaṇṭuṇarntuḷḷavā eṉa nōkkiṉ avaikaḷum carivara kāṇkiṟōm illai." Ibid.

[90] "nōyttaṉmai, nōy vanta kāraṇam, ataik kaḷaiyavēṇṭiya maruntukaḷ, maruntukaḷai vīriyappaṭuttum anupāṉaṅkaḷ koṭukkum kālam... muḻumaiyuṟṟa, ellā piṇikaḷaiyum nīkkum ōr maruttuvam illaiyā?" Ibid.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid., 98-100.

lifeless, all brain and no heart. Needless to say, lifelessness is hardly a quality that one desires in any medical system that aims to master death.

The genius of Tamil science as penetrating the depths of things beyond mere physicality distinguishes all elements of Tamil tradition. G. Subramania Pillai was one of the leading figures of the last century of Shaiva Siddhanta. He describes the method of the Tamil philosopher, the Siddhantin, as going deeper into things than *mulaprakriti*, root physicality.

> The Siddhanta has excelled all other systems of philosophy in its wonderful progress in the scientific diagnosis of nature. While the other systems pursued the analysis of the Maya or matter down to the substratum of Mulaprakriti only, the Siddhantin plunged deeper and detected that even behind it there could be found a dozen more tatvas or reals of a far more refined type than Mulaprakriti.[93]

Such insight into the invisibility of things is not mysterious but in absolute correspondence with nature. "One important feature of Siddhanta is that it gives more value for Reason, than for anything else. . . . It has not said anything which is relegated to the realms of the mysterious."[94] It is the *depth* of Tamil tradition, its ancientness and its primacy, as well as its claim to rationality, that make these assertions of the superiority of siddha medicine to an immature Western science appear credible to a Tamil audience. Insofar as these assertions are feasible, they are also pleasurable, and so this is a discourse not only of truth, not only of authority, but also of desire.

The rational nature of siddha medicine is emphasized throughout the writing of *vaidyas*, scholars, and those who celebrate Tamil tradition more generally. Yet as we have seen, this rationality is more the rationality of Maraimalai Adikal that of E.V.

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[93] G. Subramania Pillai, "Introduction and History of Saiva Siddhanta," in *Collected Lectures on Saiva Siddhanta, 1946-1954*, ed. G. Subramania Pillai (Annamalai, Tamil Nadu: Annamalai University, 1965), 20.

[94] Ibid., 13.

Ramasami, a rationality that incorporates the depth of tradition and a "sixth" sense, a "mental eye"[95] or a "wisdom eye"[96] that intuits processes beyond the mere physical. As T.V. Sambasivam Pillai, one of the most influential commentators on siddha medicine in the twentieth century and the author of the massive five-volume *Tamil-English dictionary of Medicine, Chemistry, Botany, and Allied Sciences*, first published in 1931, puts it, what is required for medicine is a "holy science," a science that has "true knowledge and understanding of natural laws." These natural laws are not just physical but require more intuitive modes of perception to be discerned. "The mysteries of curing and healing [are] hidden from the eyes, but open to the spiritual perception of the Wise."[97] Ancient siddha medicine is this very "perfection" of science.[98] The siddhars "were the greatest scientists both material and spiritual," and the "Siddhars' Science" is "the fountain head of all knowledge and sciences."[99] This Tamil science is not only the mother of Western science, but it is also the *future* of Western science because it has already discovered what Western sciences are only now coming to understand.[100] It is Western science *plus*, comprehending the understanding of Western science and much more, and therefore it is immune to the critique of Western science.[101]

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[95] "maṉakkaṇ" Kastūri, 31.

[96] Velan, 38.

[97] T. V. Sambasivam Pillai, *Introduction to Siddha Medicine (Portions Selected from the Introduction of T.V. Sambasivam Pillai's Tamil-English Cyclopaedic Dictionery* [sic]) (Madras: Directorate of Indian Medicine and Homeopathy, 1993), 8.

[98] Ibid., 4.

[99] Ibid., 42-43.

[100] Ibid., 26.

[101] Ibid., 51.

Tamil medicine, then, cuts disease at the root because it is the root of all medicine, the only medicine that truly understands the nature of things. Ayurveda and unani cannot compare because they are poor derivatives of siddha, and Western medicine lacks the depth of ancient tradition. In siddha medical discourse, this ancientness ratifies traditional practice not only in its historical depth, but also in its capability to access deeper aspects of the human body and the cosmos itself. Tamils, as Adikal characterizes them, naturally and insightfully see the divine in things, a divine which the new, and thus shallow, Western traditions miss in their focus on the superficial, physical nature of things. While E.V.R. thought Tamils might only progress after a "catastrophic deluge or storm" destroys the community and their traditions and enables them to start anew, siddha *vaidyas* are not so anxious to abandon their livelihoods and begin a study of biomedicine. They reject the notion that the only authority is a science of medicine that they do not possess, and instead advocate that their tradition contains all the insights of science and more. Siddha medicine is not only scientific but just as importantly it is *theirs,* and it thereby testifies to the essential (because it is ancient) glory of the Tamil community. As Dr. Ci̱rcapai holds, "If siddha medicine flourishes, the Tamil land can be proud. The Tamil people will live sweetly."[102]

4.6 Conclusion

It is easy to conclude that these formulations of tradition are ideologies in the Marxist sense, sophisticated and elegant discourses that mask underlying material interests. While these articulation of Tamil character are certainly in part motivated by material concerns, they are not just the *means* to material, "real" ends but themselves compose a goal. Like ideology, and as ideology, celebrations of tradition are themselves

[102] "citta maruttuvam vaḷarkkappaṭṭāl tamiḻakattiṟkup perumai. tamiḻ makkaḷ iṉitu vāḻvar." Ciṟcapai, 80.

interests. Central to the articulation of a tradition is a fantasy, a social vision that people enjoy narrating, constructing, enacting, and if necessary, defending. Insofar as tradition is a story about the social self, it is also about the individual self – when my society is great, I also am great because I am part of that society. Celebrations of tradition also eulogize the self. That is why E.V.R. called his propaganda campaign the "Self Respect Movement," which strove to defend the self-respect of each Tamil individual and the Tamil community as a whole. Where E.V.R. failed was in attempting to produce a tradition from scratch, a tradition in which Tamils did not sufficiently recognize traces of a self. Adikal's formulation has had more success in that he set out not to *produce* a tradition but to *reproduce* one, reconfiguring traces of selfhood into a new formulation of a Tamil tradition.

While ideology is itself an interest, there are other interests, economic, political, and social, that are pursued through ideology.[103] But even here, the idea of a "masking" of real interest by an ideological smoke-screen is misleading, since the relationship between interests and the character of tradition is not arbitrary. It is rather like the relationship between a mask and the person who selects it: it is chosen – thoughtfully, consciously, intentionally, or perhaps impulsively, compelled by affective motives – by the person whom it is meant to conceal, and even as it conceals, it creates a new identity. Like a dream which symbolically represents unconscious processes, the "mask" of tradition corresponds to underlying interests. The "real" social process is not one that

[103] As might be expected, economic considerations are primary. Major figures who have defended traditional practices and knowledge are those who have had economic stakes in these practices. Besides siddha *vaidyas*, whose livelihood depend on the reproduction of Tamil tradition, some of the major authors of this rhetoric were Tamil scholars, employed at universities and colleges. The celebration of Tamil traditions and language was certainly in part a justification of livelihoods that were increasingly threatened in the modern world, and an attempt to create a market for the production of traditional products. On the conjunction of social and economic value of a market, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. with an introduction by John B. Thompson, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

underlies the formulation of tradition, but is that of the conjunction of the articulation and the interests that motivate it. One aspect of this conjunction, it seems clear, is that interest motivates tradition. It is less clear, but this is my assertion, that tradition in turn constructs and shapes interests. Zizek holds that fantasy

> does not simply realize a desire in a hallucinatory way: rather, its function is similar to that of Kantian 'transcendental schematism': a fantasy constitutes our desire, provides its coordinates; that is, it literally 'teaches us how to desire'. . . . fantasy does not mean that when I desire a strawberry cake and cannot get it in reality, I fantasize about eating it; the problem is, rather: *how do I know that I desire a strawberry cake in the first place? This* is what fantasy tells me.[104]

Narratives of community do not only function in a manner *homologous* to fantasy, but contains elements of fantasy that shape our desires.

Similarly, an tradition does not merely reflect a social situation, but is itself a primary map through which we experience society, and in this way it shapes our experience of society. It can effect social change or foster social stability. Human experience emerges from the conjunction of, and discordance between, the idealization of tradition and social experience, pointing to the phantasmagoric nature of human experience. Tamil utopian formulations of tradition cannot simply be discarded as illusory, because they are themselves primary modes in which Tamils construct their world, modes which are irreducible to other sorts of human activity.

In narrating a vision of Tamil utopia, an author invites individual Tamils to participate in a social fantasy, a fantasy that itself constructs desire and, quite often, compels action. This fantasy "teaches" Tamils who they are and how they should imagine their social situation. The utopian fantasy is itself a justification for its own articulation, and if the individual views the narrative as one that is credible, the narrative creates a desire in Tamils to enact the fantasy. The intended audience of the narrative of

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[104] Slavoj Zizek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 1997), 7.

tradition is designated by the narrative itself – it is those whose ancestors were part of the primordial utopia, those whose genetic character continues to be suitable and capable of realizing a new utopia. These articulations of tradition teach non-brahman Tamil speakers to desire a rational community, an egalitarian community, and a community that excludes brahman Tamil speakers. In this way, tradition serves both socially cohesive and socially divisive functions. It teaches what sorts of elements, what sorts of characteristics, will constitute that community, and it is here that the atheist vision of E.V.R. and the rationalist theism of Adikal differ. E.V.R.'s vision strives to instill a desire for atheism, while Adikal's writings attempt to compel Tamils to more actively "recover" certain "lost" traditions.

These characterizations of Tamil tradition share with all other ideologies the attempt to constitute a particular vision of community. The qualities of the rational, the scientific, and the civilized, it seems to me, are articulated in response to depictions of Tamil identity that have emerged out of Orientalist scholarship, colonial attitudes, Indian nationalism, and rationalist and missionary critiques of Tamil tradition. These characterizations of Tamil tradition and siddha medicine as superstitious, or as plagiarisms of the Sanskrit original, were significant enough that Tamil leaders such as Adikal and E.V.R. sensed a lack of respect for the Tamil people on an increasingly important world stage. They were aware that science had become an important criterion through which knowledge and practice were legitimated in India and beyond, and that many educated Indians held science to have a universal legitimacy that transcends any particular culture. The promotion of a Tamil essence that is rational, scientific, and civilized is an attempt to invert portrayals of a superstitious Tamil society and to win for Tamils a more respected place in world history.[105]

[105] These Tamil formulations of tradition do not reject everything contained in Orientalist narratives. They retain the depiction of Aryans as alien to Indian soil and of Dravidians as indigenous in arguing for their exclusive right to political control of South India.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FOUNDERS OF TRADITION: THE MASTERY OF NATURE AND THE MASTERY OF SOCIETY

The assertion of the greatness of siddha medicine, an indigenous medical system of South India, in a medical landscape in which biomedicine enjoys a clear advantage in infrastructure and government support, is one of the ironies of the rhetoric of Tamil revivalism. Siddha practitioners finesse this contradiction by discerning the glory of their tradition in the invisible and unknowable. Tamil cultural leaders lament the present neglect of siddha medicine, locating its greatness in ancient Tamil culture, a greatness which, if the proper measures are taken, can be recovered in the future. Materially, the unrivaled accomplishment of siddha medicine is posited in medical preparations that cure all illnesses and bestow immortality, medicines whose formulas have been lost in the ravages of history but which might be recoverable with the proper research, a gambit by which, if successful, siddha practitioners hope to regain their nostalgic position as the leaders of the medical world. Personally, the eminence of siddha medicine is exemplified in the extraordinary abilities of the purported authors of siddha medical knowledge, the siddhars.

Vaidyas depict the siddhars as epitomizing all the qualities of revivalist versions of Tamil civilization – rationality, science, egalitarianism, and intuition into the divinity of the cosmos. The siddhars are generally celebrated in Tamil tradition as masters of nature. The defining characteristic of a siddhar is the acquisition of the *siddhis,* extraordinary powers that are achieved through ascetic practice and yoga. The ways that contemporary Tamils speak of these siddhars, and their extraordinary powers, is with wonder, with amazement, and with the pleasure of entertaining their audience. But also,

quite often imbedded in these retellings of great powers, is critique, of the present, of the West, of science, and of modern people pursuing material goals. At the same time, even though advancing this critique of the modern world, the speaker assures the skeptical listener that these awesome acts do not contradict the dictates of scientific sensibilities – they are not miraculous transgressions of the laws of nature, but are possible because the siddhars possessed an intimate knowledge of nature far superior to that of the present-day scientist. The narration of abilities beyond the ordinary, while often advancing a critique of the present, cannot at the same time escape contemporary sensibilities.

In this chapter, I will explore the ways in which assertions of the remarkable, unique abilities of the siddhars in their manipulation of the natural world are linked to attempts to manipulate social worlds. Because the narration of the extraordinary is a historical act, best understood by considering the agendas that compel its performance, I will examine the narration of the extraordinary in the context of twentieth century Tamil Nadu society. I will briefly consider some influential theories of practices that scholars have tended to call "magic," before presenting my own view, that the articulation of extraordinary abilities emerges out of social concerns. Specifically, when siddha *vaidyas* exclaim the extraordinary origins of their system, they do so to garner prestige for their knowledge. This is not new – medical texts that are at least half a millennium old similarly affirm the siddhars' mastery of nature. What has changed, then, is not their mastery of nature but the nature of their mastery, and the character of the natural and social worlds that they are seen to control.

5.1 Magic and Society

James Frazer and Edmund Tylor were themselves naïve in characterizing the relationship between a people and their traditions as one of naïve belief. Thus, Frazer depicts the "savage" as "erroneously" believing in magical acts in the same way he

believes in ordinary processes, and so "the savage fails to recognise those limitations to his power over nature which seem so obvious to us."[1] Bronislaw Malinowski, on the other hand, points out that all people distinguish the ordinary and extraordinary event.[2] Indeed, it is the extraordinary abilities of the siddhars, admitted by both speaker and audience, that sets their actions apart, that compel subsequent retellings, and that are a basis on which contemporary Tamils assert their place at the pinnacle of a hierarchy of societies.

If all people distinguish the ordinary and natural from the extraordinary and supernatural, why would anyone practice magical acts? Malinowski attributes this to spontaneous, reflexive instinct, of a sort which Stanley Tambiah has called "anxiety reduction" or "compensatory action."[3]

> Forsaken by his knowledge, baffled by his past experience and by his technical skill, he realizes his impotence. Yet his desire grips him only the more strongly; his anxiety, his fears and hopes, induce a tension in his organism which drives him to some sort of activity. . . Passive inaction, the only thing dictated by reason, is the last thing in which he can acquiesce. His nervous system and his whole organism drive him to some substitute activity."[4]

Dangerous events, or intense emotional experiences in which there is a gap in technological mastery, provoke a level of anxiety, a reflexive, irrational response, and a spontaneous belief in the efficacy of that response. According to Malinowski, then, magic functions primarily at the level of individual biology. This is not to say that there

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[1] James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abridged edition (New York: MacMillan, 1942), 91.

[2] Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1992), 28.

[3] Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 72.

[4] Malinowski, 79.

are no *traditions* of magic – magic is standardized into stable cultural forms.[5] However, these social forms are perpetuated for the sake of individual biology – while one might die for one's country or religion, no one would give up their lives in defense of magical belief.

In his focus on the function of magic at the level of individual psychology and biology, Malinowski overlooked the social function of magic as an element of tradition and thus as a focus of community practice. For E. E. Evans-Pritchard, magic is more about relationships in the social world than about the relationship of humans with nature. Social causes are projected onto natural events, and the control sought through the performance of magic is control over one's society, not just control over nature. Misfortune is not only a natural event, as its cause is always traced to social tensions that compel the consultation of an oracle to ferret out the guilty party. "Oracle consultations therefore express histories of personal relationships, for, as a rule, a man only places before an oracle names of those who might have injured him on account of some definite events which he believes to have occasioned their enmity."[6] Likewise, "Zande notions of witchcraft express a dynamic relationship of persons to other persons in inauspicious situations."[7]

In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke also suggests that magic is expressed more out of a desire to configure social relationships that as a response to the dictates of biology.[8] Rhetorical language, according to Burke, is "hortatory," an "inducement to

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[5] Ibid., 90.

[6] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976 [1937]), 46.

[7] Ibid., 48.

[8] Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

action."[9] It is characterized by persuasion, and especially identification between the speaker and the audience. Rhetoric therefore functions solely in social situations.[10] Magic, likewise, shares with rhetoric the capacity and intention to move people. It is "a pragmatic device that greatly assisted the survival of cultures by promoting social cohesion."[11] When siddha *vaidyas* speak of the extraordinary abilities of the founders of their knowledge, they do so not as much to make themselves feel secure in an uncertain *natural* world, but to invite an audience into accepting visions of tradition that celebrates a Tamil community in an inhospitable social, economic, and political world.

This chapter is about the narration of miracles rather than the performance of miracles. To what purpose are extraordinary abilities recounted? Insofar as miracles are performed by certain, specified individuals, with particular identities and presumed loyalties, the articulation of miraculous action speaks to social relations, and often to social discord. To make a claim for the supernatural abilities of ethnic ancestors, or of the founder of a religious community, is to make a claim for that community in its relation to other communities. It is a rhetorical device meant to link both speaker and addressed audience in a community of identification; to promote the celebration of the greatness of that community, thus a celebration of the self; and often to assert a hierarchy of communities, insofar as the narration of extraordinary events is placed in the context of contention between the persons, languages, or systems of knowledge of particular communities.

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[9] Ibid., 41-42.

[10] Ibid., 45.

[11] Ibid., 43.

5.2 The Origins of Siddha Medicine

The earliest accounts we have of the origins of siddha medicine are found in medical texts attributed to the siddhars which have been preserved on palm leaves. Agastya, a siddhar whose authorship is attributed to more texts than any other siddhar, declares the origin of a text on *muppu*, a medicine said to impart extraordinary powers and immortality.

> Daily I did puja (*pūcittu*) to the feet of Shakti, and I placed myself at the feet of Shiva, adorned with the crescent moon, before I proclaimed the [method to prepare] *muppu*.
>
> I sang many great texts, noble one (*ayyā*). I gathered the appropriate parts on *kaṟpam* [a class of rejuvenative medicines] that were in those texts, and I put them in this text without esoteric language (*paripāṣai*) for the [immortal] survival of the people of the world. I was on South Potikai Mountain....
>
> Holding the feet of Shakti in my mind, I saw the method to prepare *muppu* which is the path. While on thick-forested Potikai, many great siddhars came, ate *kaṟpam*, and asked me about the unique herb to calcinate all types of minerals. I taught them, summarizing the chemical process...
>
> I taught the method for preparing *muppu*... No one in the four [cardinal] directions knows this [method to prepare *muppu*]. I will sing this openly to you. If you understand this with skill, you too will become a rishi-siddhar!
>
> I will tell you now about the wondrous *muppu* which is used to make *centūram* [a red chemical preparation] and *paṟpa* [a white powder of metallic oxides]. Notice that I have condensed [this knowledge] in one hundred verses. Manomani [Shakti] taught it to me, and I taught it in this text exactly like she did, without errors, for the benefit of the people of the Earth (*taraṇiyōr*).[12]

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[12] "nīliyavaḷ pātamatai nitampūcittu
pātimati taṉaiyaṇinta yīcaṉpātam
paṇintuyāṉ curumuppup pāṭiṉēṉ. (1)

pāṭiṉēṉ aṉēkanūl peritē ayyā
paṇpāka atilirunta kaṟpantaṉṉiṟ
kūṭiṉēṉ paripāṣai yillāmaṟṟāṉ
kuvalaiyattōr piḻaippataṟku intanūlait

The origin of siddha medical knowledge is traced to Shiva and his consort Shakti, who taught Agastya through a vision as he was worshipping them. Agastya in turn taught the other siddhars and then committed the medical formulae to writing for "the benefit of the people of the Earth." While the text is in Tamil, there is no hint of reflexivity of this fact, no designation of the earthly benefactors of this knowledge as Tamils, and no characterization of this knowledge in the language of Tamil revivalism. While this medical knowledge is traced to Shiva, the god whom Adikal and the Shaiva Siddhantins stress in their notions of Tamil community, it was transmitted in the context of *puja*, the most common ritual of worship in Hinduism, a ritual which is often mediated by temple priests and which does not conform to the spiritual rationalism attributed to the ancient Tamils.[13]

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tēṭiṉēṉ teṉpotikai taṉiliruntēṉ... (2)

maṉōmaṇiyāḷ pātamatai maṉatilvaittu
mārkkamuḷḷa kurumuṭikka vakaiyuṅkaṇṭēṉ
vaṉamperutta teṉpōtikai yirukkumpōtu
mācittaraṉēkar vantu kaṟpamuṇṭu
iṉampirittuc carakkuvakai centūrikka
ēkamūlikai yataṉai yeṭuttuk kēṭṭār
ciṉamataṅki vātamataic curukkic coṉṉēṉ... (3)

cāṟṟiṉēṉ muppūviṉ mārkkantaṉṉai...
nāṟṟicaiyi luḷḷavark laṟiyārappā
naṉṟāka vuntaṉukkut tiṟantucolvēṉ
āṟṟaluṭaṉitaiyaṟintu ceyvāyāṉāl
appaṉē riṣicittaṉāvāy kūṟē. (4)

centūram paṟpamuṟai taṉṉaicceyya
aṟputamāyc collukiēṉ muppūtaṉṉai
aṭakkiṉēṉ nūṟukku laṟintupāru...
maṉōṉmaṇiyā ḷeṉakkucconnāḷ
tappitaṅkaḷillaiyaṭā yintanūlait
tāyconna paṭiconnēṉ taraṇiyōrkkē. (6)

"Akastya Muṉivar Aruḷiya Kaṟpa Muppu Kuru Nūl 100" ["Agastya's 100 Verses on the Regenerative Compound Muppu"], verses 1-6, in *Agastyar Muppu Cūttiraṅkaḷ* [Agastya's Texts on Muppu], ed. Es. Pi. Rāmaccantiraṉ (Chennai: Tāmarai Nūlakam, 1992), 9-12.

[13] Shiva is often considered to be the most Tamil of all the gods, the god who destroyed the Vedic sacrifice, the god whom Tamil Lemurian historians posit to have appeared on Indus Valley seals, the god who has been invoked by many bhakti poets in their rejection of caste, the god of the Shaiva Siddhantins.

Contemporary siddha medical practitioners tell two kinds of stories to account for the origins of their knowledge. One type is drawn from the sort of narrative given in the manuscripts, in which the siddhars are the mediators between the divine and human realms.

> For the relief of the suffering of souls [*āṉmākkaḷ* -- the part of the individual that is distinguished from the body and the mind], the eternal, highest Shiva took form and taught many arts to the likes of Umadevi [Shakti], Kumaravel [Murukan], Tirumular, and Agatyar. Siddha medicine, which contains all of the arts, came to the Tamil land, which is the Dravidian country, through the siddhars. With the assistance of this great art, people conquered wrinkles, gray hair, death and disease, living long lives of great bliss.[14]

While the siddhars remain the conduits of medical knowledge, the earthly location of this knowledge is not "the Earth" in general but the "Tamil land" (tamiḻakam). As the siddhars link divine knowledge and the human realm, so also they link medical knowledge and an ethnicized Tamil community. While the manuscripts simply speak of the knowledge of *muppu, kaṟpam, centūram*, and *paṟpam* medicines, Piḷḷai speaks of siddha medicine, assigning this knowledge a systematic designation that the manuscript does not suggest.

This genealogy of siddha medicine is the articulation of the *paramparai* of current medical knowledge. *Paramparai*, which I earlier examined in relation to the English

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Others give Murukan the title of Tamil divinity, because Murukan, though present in the Sanskrit literary world as Skandha, has a distinct character and is a common object of devotion only in South India. For Shiva in Sanskrit mythology, see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Siva: The Erotic Ascetic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973). On Murukan, see Fred W. Clothey, *The Many Faces of Murukan: The History and Meaning of a South Indian God*, Religion and Society 6 (New York: Mouton Publishers, 1978), and Kamil V. Zvelebil, *Tiru Murukan* (Madras: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 1981).

[14] "āṉmākkaḷ tukka nivarttikkāka, anāti muttu paramasivaṉ oru tiruvurukkoṇṭu pala kalaikaḷaiyum umādēvi, kumaravēḷ, tirumūlar, akattiyar pōṉṟvarkaḷukku aṟivuṟuttiṉār. sakala kalaikaḷaṭaṅkiya citta maruttuvam cittarkaḷ mūlamākat tirāviṭa nāṭākiya tamiḻakattikku vantatu. ikkalaiyiṉ pērutaviyāl makkaḷ paṉṉeṭuṅkālam narai, tirai, mūppu, nōy nīṅki, nīṇṭa āyuḷuṭaṉ pēriṉba vāḻvu vāḻntaṉar." S. Citambarataāṇu Piḷḷai, *Citta Maruttuva Amutu* [The Nectar of Siddha Medicine] (Chennai: Citta Maruttuva Nūl Āräycci Nilaiyam, 1991), 5.

"tradition," designates a succession of "knowers," a lineage of knowledge. By tracing this lineage back to Shiva, both narratives claim the authority of divinity for their knowledge, an authority not subject to the fallibility of ordinary people. The latter, "Tamil-ized" narrative is articulated in a context in which all the links of the lineage have Tamil credentials. What was simply "knowledge" of the way to make medicines, knowledge that had a divine source and which could have extraordinary effects, becomes "Tamil" knowledge, overlain with a connection to a linguistic, ethnic, and racialized Tamil community. While in the manuscript narrative the *paramparai* carried the authority of divinity (Shiva and Shakti) and semi-divinity (the siddhars), the later narrative retains these and adds another, the authority of Tamil revivalism.

In Piḷḷai's narrative, Shiva, in his compassion for humans and empathy for their suffering, teaches them the arts, which besides medicine would include things like music, dancing, astrology, yoga, and magic. Of these, siddha medicine holds the highest place because it contains all the others, and it is the best suited for the purpose of all the arts, to relieve suffering. This suffering is not that of the body (*uṭal*), but that of the *āṉmā* (Sanskrit *ātmā*), the part of the individual that is distinguished from the body and the mind, the seat of the human person. This is the "*uyir*," the animating force of life that Western science does not perceive. However, this linking of medical formulae with spiritual aims is one that the pre-modern text does not make. The aims of the knowledge transmitted in the manuscript text is solely physical – it is for the "survival of the people in the world." Nor is there any attempt to link this knowledge to other sorts of arts. Indeed, in these texts, the medical formulae are generally given for physical ends, as the immortality of the body is not an opportunity for higher spiritual practice but is a goal in itself, a bodily pleasure with no sublime counterpart.

Both narratives place the origin of siddha medicine in the realm of divinity. Its descent to the sphere of human knowledge is mediated by a hierarchy of divinity. First

are Shiva and Shakti, and sometimes Murugan. Next come the exemplary devotees of Shiva and Shakti, the siddhars, who were once ordinary humans but who, through their ascetic practice and consumption of miraculous medicines, have become semi-divine beings, immortal and possessing extraordinary powers. The historical path of siddha medicine originates in divinity and descends to the human world via extraordinary humans. This human world, as we will see, is not the degenerate world of today, nor the mixed societies of the ancient world, but the pure, ancient Tamil utopia. Siddha medicine travels from a *divine* utopia, a world of the heavens that is free from sickness and that is itself the origin of the universe, to a human utopia of the ancient Tamil land.

Contemporary siddha practitioners tell a second, very different sort of narrative about the origins of siddha medicine, one that is absent in the pre-modern texts. In their bid to establish siddha medicine as rational, *vaidyas* characterize their knowledge not as a gift of the gods but as a medical "science" developed by the siddhars through their researches into nature. According to this narrative, it was the ancient Tamils, exemplified by the siddhars, who in their compassion for ordinary people developed and bestowed siddha medicine to the Tamil land and later to the world.

> Many centuries ago, Tamil Nadu was one of the greatest countries in the world in all ways. At that time siddha medicine flourished... Tamils were the first in the world to discover cures for human disease. When disease entered the body, there were great medical people who would examine the sick person and his body, determine the precise nature of the disease, and prepare and administer the medicine appropriate for the cure. Because those great medical people lived as sages (*muṉivarkaḷ*) who have completely renounced the world, and because they were geniuses who knew the three times [past, present and future], they were called siddhars (*cittarkaḷ*).[15]

[15] "tamiḻnāṭu pala nūṟṟāṇṭukaḷukku muṉṉarē cakala vakaikaḷilum ciṟanta naṉṉāṭukaḷil oṉṟāka iruntu irukkiṟatu. atu camayam citta vaittiyamum ciṟantoṅkiyatu... makkaḷiṉ nōyai nīkkum muṟaiyai ulakil mutalil kaṇṭupiṭittavarkaḷ tamiḻarkaḷē. maṉitaṉ nōyvāwppaṭṭāl avaṉaiyum, avaṉatu uṭalaiyum paricīlittu nōy iṉṉatueṉak kaṇṭu, ataṉai nīkkuvataṟkuriya maruntukaḷait tayārittuk koṭuttu kuṇamākkiya maruttuvap periyārkaḷ, muṟṟum tuṟanta muṉivarkaḷākavum, mukkālattaiyum uṇarnta mētaikaḷākavum iruntatāl

As Lemuria is celebrated as the origin of all civilization, so too siddha medicine is exalted as the original medical system of the world. The siddhars, like the ancient Tamils of revivalist tradition, are geniuses, scientists who "discovered" the principles of the body and developed effective medicines to counter illness. As the Tamil-ness of siddha medical knowledge has been increasingly celebrated, so too have the siddhars been increasingly characterized according to the features of Tamil community that I have outlined above.

Contemporary practitioners often confirm the notion that the siddhars developed their medical knowledge to increase the potential for their salvation. The siddhars realized the importance of bodily health for spiritual attainment. Therefore, in their spiritual quests,

> ...the ancient Siddhars were constrained to make a research in the field of medicine also.... In this process the Siddhars came by a knowledge of medical science which surpassed the then known knowledge of all the learned doctors in the field. As the Siddhars knew all about the body and the functions of its various parts, it was easy for them to compound medicine to remedy any type of ailment. The Siddhars' knowledge of the human anatomy was perfect. Their single-minded concentration was unique. So, when they set out to perform any work, it was achieved with a perfection. Thus did the Siddhars who aimed at turning into Doctors of the soul, incidentally turn into doctors of the Body also.[16]

The siddhars sought embodied salvation, and so they developed a variety of medicines that would help them preserve their bodies. They "investigated" the principles of the body, and developed their knowledge of alchemy, medicine and yoga. "With the help of remedies of high potencies and virtues, consisting of all kinds of drugs, minerals, metallic preparations and poisons, they sought for Elixir of life, thus conquering all infirmities

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akkālattil avarkaḷukkuc "cittar"kaḷe̱ṉap peyar varalāyiṟṟu." Dr. M. P. Taṅkavēl, "Tamiḻakamum Citta Vaittiyamum" ["The Tamil Land and Siddha Medicine"], in *Iraṇṭām Ulakattamiḻ Māṉāṭu*, 19.

[16] N. Kandasamy Pillai, *History of Siddha Medicine*, 2d ed. (Chennai: Tamil Nadu Government, 1998 [1978]), 406.

against gray hairs, wrinkles of the skin, old age and death."[17] The physical effectiveness of the siddhars' knowledge is only the external "sheath" of a much deeper transformation, as their ultimate goal is not the mastery of natural processes but the transcendence of nature. It is in articulating this goal of liberation that *vaidyas* distinguish their knowledge from Western medicine, which aptly describes the physical world but overlooks the "soul" of things. At the same time, the "science" of the siddhars sets their medicine apart from ayurveda, which is founded on the illusory principles of Aryan culture.

5.3 The Identity of the Siddhars

Tamil conceptions of the siddhars are based on myths, both written and oral, contemporary and classical, that narrate their extraordinary feats. Depictions of the siddhars as the founders of the Tamil "sciences" – medicine, astrology, yoga, and chemistry – as well as descriptions of these sciences, are based on the thousands of palm-leaf manuscripts that have been used by hereditary *vaidyas* for centuries, and which now more often than not are housed in libraries and archives throughout the state. These manuscripts are attributed to the siddhars, each representing a particular *paramparai* of knowledge, a lineage that originates with Shiva and Shakti, mediated by one of the siddhars and ending with the current *vaidya*. While diverse in content, these texts share common conceptions of the human body and its relationship with the environment, and they all detail recipes, rituals, astrological criteria, and devotional practices through which physical processes can be manipulated in extraordinary ways. Perhaps most importantly, they share the goal of immortality, of embodied liberation, a goal in which medical formulae play a vital role.

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[17] T. V. Sambasivam Pillai, Tamil-English Dictionary, 2082-83.

What is the dating of these texts? The extant manuscripts are no older than 250 years old, and most date from the 19th century.[18] They contain errors typical of those made when recopying a text, and so are certainly copies of earlier texts. The best indication of the date of their initial redaction is found in their language, which is fairly modern and colloquial. R. Venkatraman dates most of the manuscripts attributed to Agastya to around the 15th century, noting that in no literature prior to that time is Agastya linked to medicine.[19] While many of the medical texts were probably composed around this time, there are other philosophical texts attributed to the siddhars which are much older. Perhaps the most well-known of these is the *Tirumantiram* of Tirumūlar, which likely dates from around the 7th century C.E.[20] Sanskrit and Tamil mythologies of the siddhars are even older. The figure of Agastya in Sanskrit literature appears in the Rig Veda (c.1200-900 B.C.E.), and in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana.[21] He first appears in Tamil literature in the Maṇimēkalai, which dates to about 500 C.E.[22]

According to Tamil revivalist writers, the siddhars were, or still are, real historical personages. Some assert that because one of their powers is time travel, they cannot be dated.[23] Others hold that, because the siddhars are immortal, they continue to live, but

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[18] Vē. Irā. Mātavaṉ, *Akattiyar Vaittiya Kāviyam 1500* [1500 Medical Verses of Agastya], (Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu: Tamil University Press, 1994), 10.

[19] R. Venkatraman, *A History of The Tamil Siddha Cult* (Madurai, Tamil Nadu: Ennes Publications, 1990), 115.

[20] Kamil Veith Zvelebil, *Tamil Literature*, vol. 10, *A History of Indian Literature*, ed. Jan Gonda, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1974), 55.

[21] See *The Rig Veda*, O'Flaherty, 167-72, 250-52.

[22] Venkatraman, 40-41.

[23] "iṉṟaikkum cittarkaḷ irukkalām. avarkaḷait terintu koḷḷātatu nammuṭaiya aṟpa aṟivu, mayakkam kāraṇamākattāṉē." Irā. Māṇikkavācakam, *Nam Nāṭṭu Cittarkaḷ* [Our Country's Siddhars], (Chennai: Mulikai Mani Publishers, 1978), 213.

away in the mountains, far from society.[24] Another writes: “Even today there can be siddhars. But we do not gain any positive knowledge about them because of our negligible knowledge and confusion.”[25] Another holds that they are generally invisible, and in any case they prefer “solitude in the jungles and on the mountain tops.”[26] Others assert that there are indeed siddhars today, and that they can be seen in our midst.[27]

Most, however, locate the siddhars in the utopian Tamil past. T. V. Sambasivam Pillai posits that the siddhars developed their knowledge sometime between 10,000 - 4,400 B.C., or in any case before the introduction of ayurveda which brought with it an “indifference to the past.” In other words, siddha medical knowledge was founded in a past before the earliest historical records, the “once upon a time” of Tamil utopia. “Siddhar’s period was one of intense intellectual activity in all the arts and sciences. In the realm of medicine, it was indeed a golden age. New ideas took root and flourished.”[28] Chastising those who hold that the siddhars, having mastered themselves and the world would continue to desire to be in their bodies, Mē. Cī. Cuppiramaṇiyam writes:

> After achieving an ideal state, a state in which there is nothing left to achieve, would there be any greater foolishness than wandering the world, burdened by a useless body? The siddhars, having reached a state of seamless union with god (*iṟaivaṉ*), regard the body to be insignificant and discard it. This is why none of them today walk in our midst.[29]

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[24] Mātavaṉ, *Akattiyar Vaittiya Kāviyam 1500*, 37.

[25] Mē. Cī. Cuppiramaṇiyam, *Cittarkaḷ Iracavātakkalai* [The Siddhars’ Art of Chemistry] (Chennai: Tāmarai Nūlakam, 1985), 7.

[26] T. V. Sambasivam Pillai, *Tamil-English Dictionary*, 2083.

[27] Velan, 78-91.

[28] T. V. Sambasivam Pillai, *Tamil-English Dictionary*, 2089.

[29] “oru ilaṭciyattai aṭainta piṉṉar ataṟku mēl aṭaivataṟku oṉṟumillāta pōtu mēlum appaṭiyē oru payaṉamilāmal vīṇāka uṭalaic cumantu koṇṭu tirivatu pōṉṟa vaṭikkaṭṭiṉa muṭṭāḷtaṉam ētāvatu irukka muṭiyumā? cittarkaḷ iṟaivaṉōṭu iraṇṭaṟak kalakkum nilaiyai aṭainta piṟaku uṭalait turumpāka matittu atai vīci eṟintu viṭṭu iṟaimai aṭaiya virumpiyatālēyē avarkaḷil yārum iṉṟu varai nammiṭaiyē naṭamāṭavillai eṉpatait tiṇṇamāka nampalām.” Mē. Cī. Cuppiramaṇiyam, 8.

In other words, the siddhars achieved bodily immortality, but they chose not to take it. They retained their absolute mastery of nature, indeed realized it most fully, in giving up their bodies.

This is all to say that the siddhars, the only "people" who have perfect knowledge of the siddha medical tradition, are no longer active participants in the perpetuation and restoration of this tradition. In 1968, the Tamil government sponsored the Second World Tamil Conference, a forum to celebrate Tamil tradition. At an auxiliary conference on siddha medicine, one of the participants asserts that only the siddhars have mastered medical knowledge, and they have stayed away from the conference because they have no need for it. All those present have not mastered the siddhars' art.[30] As Tamil revivalists locate the perfection of Tamil civilization in the inscrutable past, the perfection of siddha medicine resides with the siddhars, who themselves reside in the nooks and crannies of Tamil Nadu and of history itself, in times and places inaccessible to the present.

The project of those who attended that conference, indeed, of all those who speak of themselves as working to "revive" siddha medicine, is to bring this shadowy siddha medical knowledge into the light of public recognition. To borrow a term from Hugh Urban, contemporary *vaidyas*, on the surface, at least, seek to "exotericize" an esoteric tradition, to shift the locus of the most effective medical knowledge from private to public space, from jungles and mountaintops to libraries and conference centers.[31] But while the siddhars' absence is cited as the reason that siddha medicine has not retained its former perfection, their inaccessibility is itself the condition for the inscrutability of these glorious claims for siddha medical knowledge.

[30] Es. Kē. Es. Kāḷimuttup Piḷḷai, 64.

[31] Hugh Urban, *The Economics of Ecstasy: Tantra, Secrecy, and Power in Colonial Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 203.

The inclusion of the siddhars in the genealogy of a pure Tamil race is predicated on the nature of their writings, which at times are stridently anti-caste, anti-brahman, and anti-Vedic. Their writing style, while sometimes poetic, is more often colloquial.[32] Ironic to figures who reside beyond the limits of society, the writings of the siddhars are considered by some to be the most accessible of pre-modern Tamil literature, speaking not only to the literary elite but to the common person. A historian of Tamil literature, Purnalingam Pillai, comments on the writings of the siddhars: "They are the most popular works in Tamil and there is no pure Tamilian, educated or uneducated, who has not committed to memory at least a few stanzas from one or other of them. In respect of religion, the Siddhars or sages were pure theists, and while retaining Siva as the name of the One God, rejected everything in Siva worship inconsistent with pure theism.... They were the haters of the Aryan social fabric, religious rites, and the Vedic authority..."[33] Consistent with the Shaiva Siddhanta formulations of Maraimalai Adikal, the siddhars are celebrated in their intimate connection with the Tamil language, with "pure Tamilians," and with worship of Shiva, the divine patron of the Tamil race.

In their scientific prowess and religious acumen, the siddhars embody the qualities most celebrated by Tamil revivalists. Yet this is not enough to make them properly Tamil. They must also be autochthonous like the Tamil people and Tamil tradition. While there are Sanskrit traditions of siddha alchemy and yoga that have thrived in the north, Tamil revivalists locate the origins of all siddhar traditions on the Tamil soil.

> Our great Tamil siddhars bestowed the first medicine to the world for the redemption of the world many thousands of years ago. Our country is extolled as the country of the siddhars. Tiruvāvaṭuturai is the city of ninety million siddhars. Paḻani mountain considered to be the mountain home of siddhars. The Kaṭcamalai siddha temple is associated with

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[32] T. V. Sambasivam Pillai, *Tamil-English Dictionary*, 2104.

[33] S. Purnalingam Pillai, 263.

> Kālāṅki siddhar. Historical details of the siddhars, who have obtained the eight supernatural powers, are contained in our ancient Tamil literature. Siddha medicine, the original medicine (*ātimaruntu*), has been studied in Tamil Nadu from ancient times. Such great medical methods (*muṟai*) shine as the unique artistic wealth of Tamil Nadu.[34]

For Ā. Caṉmukavēlaṉ, the landscape and literature of Tamil Nadu is suffused with presence of the siddhars. It is a "siddhar-ized" land and literature. The coherence of Tamil tradition – constituted of a people, a culture, a language, a soil, and an essential character – is organic, unified in originating from, and remaining rooted to, a unique soil. The link between the siddhars and contemporary Tamils is that of blood, as the eighteen siddhars are "our ancestors."[35] The siddhars, founders of medical knowledge, are also the progenitors of the Tamil community, this paternal role a strange one for celibate yogis.

The "siddhars are the sages of the Tamil soil... They should always be praised as the leaders (*talaivarkaḷ*) of the Tamil race (*iṉam*)."[36] The siddhars are not only the first and the greatest Tamil scientists or doctors, but the first and the greatest of all Tamils, the exemplary models of what it is to be Tamil. In tracing their knowledge to the siddhars, contemporary *vaidyas* can claim the appropriateness of this knowledge to Tamils. If the *Tamil* nature of siddha medical knowledge seems over determined, it is only because the connection between the Tamil people and their knowledge has been called into question,

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[34] "ki. mu. pallāyiram āṇṭukaḷukkumuṉ ulakam vuyya āti maruntai aruḷic ceytār nam aruntamiḷc cittar. cittarvāḻ nāṭuyeṉṟu namnāṭu pōṟṟappaṭukiṟatu. tiruvāvaṭuturai navakōṭi cittarpuram. paḻaṉimalai cittaṉvōḻ malai eṉappaṭum. kañcamalaiccittar kōyil kālāṅkic cittarōṭu toṭarpuṭaiyatu. eṇvakaic cittikaḷum kaivarap peṟṟa cittarkaḷuṭaiya varalāṟṟuk kuṟippukaḷ nam paṇṭait tamiḻ nūlkaḷil iṭam peṟṟuḷḷaṉa. ātimaruntai aṭippaṭaiyākak koṇṭu citta maruttuvam paṇṭaikkālantoṭṭu tamiāṭṭil payilappaṭṭu varikiṉṟatu. ittakaiya perumaivāynta maruttuva muṟai tamiḻnāṭu tōṟḤuvitta uyartaṉikkalaic celvamākat tikaḻkiṉṟatu." Ā. Caṉmukavēlaṉ, "Tirumūlar Aruḷiya Maruttuvat Tirumantiram 8000" ["The 8000 Verses of Tirumūlar's Medical Mantras"], in *Iraṇṭām Ulakattamiḻ Mānāṭu*, 49.

[35] V. S. Pārvati, "Citta Vaittiyamum Makaḷir Maruttuvamum," ["Siddha Medicine and Women's Medicine"], in *Iraṇṭām Ulakattamiḻ Mānāṭu Citta Maruttuva Karuttaraṅku Ciṟappu Malar* [Second World Tamil Conference, Siddha Medicine Seminar Special Souvenir] (Chennai, 1968), 86.

[36] *Tamiḻ (Citta) Maruttuvak Kōṭpāṭu*, 4-5.

both by Indian nationalists who promote ayurveda as the essence of Indian medicine, and by biomedical doctors who assert the universality of their knowledge and thus its appropriateness, indeed, its truth, for all people.

An etymological analysis of the word "siddhar" immediately highlights the contradictory nature of revivalist assertions of the pure Tamil credentials of the siddhars. "Siddhar," the term most commonly used as the English equivalent of the Tamil "*cittar*," and thus the term I use here, only partly transcribes the Tamil. Indeed, it rather transcribes the Sanskrit "*siddha*" and adds the Tamil personal suffix "r." "*Siddha*" is derived from the Sanskrit verbal root "*sidh*," meaning to accomplish or succeed.[37] *Siddhaḥ*, a nominalization of the past participle of "*sidh*," means one who is accomplished or successful in some sort of discipline. A *siddhaḥ* is generally an adept in practice of yoga, a being perfected through the performance of austerities, "particularly characterized by eight supernatural faculties called *siddhis*."[38] These eight *siddhis* include the ability to make the body extremely light (*laghimā*), big (*mahimā*), or small (*aṇimā*), subduing others to one's will (*vaśitvam*), control of desire (*kāmāvasāyitā*), and acquiring whatever one wishes (*prākāmyam*).

The Tamil equivalent is "*cittar*," which carries the same meanings as the Sanskrit *siddhaḥ*. Many writers, however, posit a different etymology. They take *cittar* as a personal form of the word "*cit*," (Sanskrit *cit*), which means intellect or consciousness.[39] Thus a "*cittar*" would refer to someone with superior intelligence. I believe this etymology is flawed, primarily because *siddhaḥ* in the Sanskrit designates a tradition of

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[37] See V. S. Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, in 3 volumes (Poona: Prasad Prakashan, 1959). And here already one confronts the irony of the Sanskrit origins of a word that describes figures that many consider to be the ancestors and eminent personages of an ancient, pure, non-Aryan, non-brahman, non-Sanskrit Tamil race.

[38] Ibid., 1681.

[39] S. Citambaratāṇu Piḷḷai, *Citta Maruttuva Amutu*.

semi-divine beings who have gained supernatural powers through their asceticism, a precise correlation to the Tamil *cittars*. Although the formal linguistic connection between the Tamil *cittar* and the Tamil *cit* is questionable, the fact that it is emphasized by Tamil authors is important and contributes to contemporary characterizations of the siddhars. These characterizations take a siddhar to be a man (there are no female siddhars) who, through his ascetic practice, has attained both a superior intellect and a "finished" state of religious perfection. While Sanskrit and ancient Tamil traditions speak of the siddhars as semi-divine beings, contemporary authors often, and only partially, demythologize the siddhars, seeing them as people of ordinary birth who, through their ascetic practice, understood deeply the laws of nature and thus gained a mastery over the physical world.

Like the etymology of the word "siddhar," mythologies of the siddhars raise the specter of the intimate connections between Tamil and Sanskrit that non-brahman Tamil leaders dismiss as superficial. A detailed look at one of the siddhars, Agastya, will bear out some of the complexity of this relationship.

5.4 Agastya

More medical texts are attributed to Agastya than to any other siddhar, approximately one-third of all extant manuscripts.[40] Many consider him to be the founder of the siddha medical system, or the primary mediator of siddha medical knowledge to the Tamil people.[41] But when we look at Tamil and Sanskrit mythologies of Agastya, a tension becomes apparent between the proclamation of Agastya and his medical knowledge as devoid of Sanskrit influence, and his mythology in which he is a

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[40] Madhavan, *Siddha Medical Manuscripts in Tamil.*

[41] See, for example, B. Mācilāmaṇi, I.M.P., "Cittarkaḷ Ārātaṉai Muṟaiyum Payaṉum," ["The Ways and Uses of Worship of the Siddhars"], in *Citta Maruttuva Nūl Āraycci Nilaiyam Mupperum Viḻā Malar*, 19.

Northerner who reluctantly traveled to the south in order to balance the world's burden of significant beings, a brahman who was the first person to learn Tamil and the first to organize it into a grammar, and an Aryan who taught Tamil to the people of the south. A closer look at Agastya will demonstrate the intricate historical interweaving of Tamil and Sanskrit. I will focus on Tamil narratives to highlight the element of fabrication in the attempts of Tamil revivalists leaders to discern a pure essence in Tamil tradition.

One of the most common myths of Agastya's move to the south tells the story of the wedding of Shiva and Parvati. The Kañcippurāṉam narrates,

> Everyone of superlative greatness gathered in the Himalayas for the wedding of Shiva and Parvati, and Agastya set out to join them. The gathering in the north caused the earth to tip, and the North sank and the South rose up. At the time when they were performing the wedding, filled with auspicious rites, Shiva summoned Agastya to him there and gave permission for him to go to Potiyil mountain in the South, in order to make the earth level. Agastya was extremely upset, and protested vehemently. . . . Shiva, not wanting him to suffer, noted the creation of another Kanci in the Pantiyan country near Potiyil mountain. Moreover, he and Parvati would reveal themselves to Agastya in their wedding clothes there, in [the southern] Kanci. . . . Agastya rejoiced, bowed before Shiva's feet, and left with his wife for the South land. When they arrived, the earth became completely even. There, Agastya saw the wedding of Shiva.[42]

This is hardly a tale extolling the virtues of the south. Agastya protests Shiva's order that he go to the south, which was at that time lacking a sufficient number of "weighty" beings, an expression both figurative and literal. The wedding of Shiva and Parvati itself is in the north, and the south gets only a reenactment of the main event.

Tamil traditions celebrate Agastya as the "father of Tamil," the author of its first grammar and, perhaps, of the language itself.[43] This tradition can be traced to the commentary of Nakkīrar on an early work of rhetoric, the Iṟaiyaṉār Akappōruḷ, which

[42] Quoted in William Spencer Davis, "Agastya: The Southern Sage From the North" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2000), 251.

[43] Venkatraman, 41.

cites Agastya as the author of Tamil grammar.[44] The Pal̲an̲ittalapurāṇam of Pāla Cuppiramaṇiyak Kavirāyar (1903) tells the story of Agastya's role as intermediary between Tamil as a divine language and the human world. After a dispute about who was the greatest sage in the world, a contest of "who has [best] performed austerities in the Vedic Shaiva path,"

> Agastya worshiped Śiva until the god appeared and taught him a sacred mantra, saying, "This is sweet Tamil. Murukan̲ will teach it all to you without leaving anything out. First worship for one year in the āśramas of Adikeśava and Parāśara, and then return to Śivagiri." Agastya followed this command; Murukan̲ instructed him in the Tamil syllabary and the other parts of grammar, then disappeared into his shrine.
> When Agastya returned to the sages, he was welcomed by Vyāsa and the rest: "You have brought mountains here so that the south will flourish, and you have enabled all to taste the divine drink of Tamil." Agastya put Tamil grammar in the form of aphorisms for the benefit of the land between Vaṭaveṅkaṭam and Tēn̲kumari, and he expounded his book to his twelve disciples.[45]

Vaṭaveṅkaṭam is the modern temple complex Tirupati, just north of the present boundary of Tamil Nadu, while Tēn̲kumari is a river that is said to have flowed through Lemuria.[46] The ramifications of this myth are many for notions of the origins of the Tamil language. First, there is a tradition that it is a divine language, come to the human realm via Agastya. However, it is also significant that Agastya is a Vedic sage, a northern brahman whose status as the greatest of sages is predicated on his knowledge of both Sanskrit and Tamil. Tamil is the culmination of the Vedic path, its newest addition. Agastya's role as the siddhar who conveyed Tamil from the divine to the human world is paralleled by his role as the transmitter of siddha medical knowledge. Thus, the Tamil language and

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[44] David Dean Shulman, *Tamil Temple Myths* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 6.

[45] Quoted in ibid., 7.

[46] Ibid., 7-8.

siddha medicine, two major cornerstones of recent formulations of non-brahman Tamil tradition, owe their existence to a brahman from the north.

In another myth, Agastya discovers the first Tamil grammar not through his own researches or by holding Shakti's feet in his mind, but when Shiva points out a pile of palm leaves in a distant corner of a Sanskrit college in the northern city of Benares.[47] This grammar is called the *Akattiyam*, a text which is not extant but which is celebrated as the first Tamil grammar, the grammar which set the rules that dictated the literary production of the first two Tamil academies on Lemuria. Agastya is said to have taken on twelve students, of which the favorite, Tolkkāppiyar, is the attributed author of the first extant Tamil grammar, written in the third academy, called *Tolkāppiyam*.[48] In my mind, the Agastya mythology represents an accurate view of the history of Tamil society and culture, characterized as they are by Sanskrit and non-Sanskrit elements.

While many *vaidyas* celebrate Agastya as the "father" of siddha medicine, his legacy as a brahman and a Northerner has led others to depict him as a foreigner who corrupted a previously perfect medical system. T.V. Sambasivam Pillai's *Tamil-English Dictionary of Medicine, Chemistry, Botany, and Allied Sciences*, in 5 volumes, published in 1931 by "The Research Institute of Siddhar's Science" in Madras, is a landmark in the modern formulation of a siddha medical system. Pillai tells a story of Tamil/Sanskrit interactions in which these two languages are not assimilated into relatively unified spheres of knowledge and practice, but which oppose each other to the present day.

> In about 750 B.C., the Aryans began penetrating [the south] around the Vindya Mountains... and their entry is preserved in the tradition regarding Agastya's coming to the south. It would appear that the Aryan migration

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[47] Kamil V. Zvelebil, *Companion Studies to the History of Tamil Literature,* Handbuch der Orientalistik, Zveite Abteilung, Indien, Erganzungsband 5 (New York : Brill, 1992), 39, note 33.

[48] See "Akattiyam," in the *Encyclopaedia of Tamil Literature*, vol. 2 (Madras: Institute of Asian Studies, 1992), 21-23.

> to South India refers to this period. The Dandhaka forest marked the Aryan frontier, and the Aryan immigrants came into the Tamil land under the lead of Agastya.
>
> This Agastya carried ayurveda to South India and founded a new school of medicine after his name… It is only after the coming of Agastya, that the Siddha System and the school received a death blow, as he was responsible for introducing the Aryan culture into the Tamil country. The siddhars period of culture ceased to exist from this date… It is presumed that the Arya Agastya is responsible for innumerable changes in the Siddhar's Science in his attempt to secure an equal footing to ayurveda.[49]

Agastya is not the original redactor of the Tamil language, but rather the Aryan brahman who corrupts the Tamil language, arts, and practices by introducing Aryan, Sanskritic elements. In the medical texts attributed to Agastya, Pillai argues, Agastya mixed ayurveda in an attempt to degrade the superior Tamil siddha medical system. Pillai attempts to excise the Aryan Agastya from the group of 18 siddhars by distinguishing this Agastya from another Agastya whose credentials to Tamil purity are undeniable: this Tamil Agastya is one of the original eighteen siddhars who founded the Tamil sciences. This Tamil Agastya was of the Vellalar caste, the very caste of Pillai himself and the community that has been the primary force in the Tamil revivalist movement.[50]

5.5 Siddhars and the Mastery of Nature

Pre-modern and contemporary literature on the siddhars, as well as the writings attributed to the siddhars, depict their relationship to the world as one of mastery and domination. They control their appetites and sexual desires through asceticism and their bodies and minds through yoga and meditation. On successfully mastering themselves, they gain powers, *siddhis*, through which they can control the physical world in

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[49] T. V. Sambasivam Pillai, *Tamil-English Dictionary,* 2089.

[50] Ibid., 2089.

extraordinary ways. In these ways the siddhars are part of South Asian traditions that link yoga, ascetic practice, and extraordinary abilities that date to at least 300 A.D.[51]

Insofar as they link mastery of desire, their bodies, and the physical world, the siddhars are apt figures to place at the beginnings of siddha medical knowledge. In premodern manuscripts, the siddhars are great devotees who, through their devotion to Shiva and Shakti, received the grace of divinity in the form of medical formulae. According to these texts, these medicines were not the products of their extraordinary knowledge but the rewards of their extraordinary devotion. Furthermore, according to these manuscripts, these medicines were the *cause* of the siddhars' great powers, not the fruit of these powers. As Agastya points out in his text on *muppu*, "If you understand this [the formula for *muppu*] with skill, you too will become a rishi-siddhar!"[52] Another siddhar, Kailāca Caṭṭamuṇi, holds that simply eating a plant call "*ceruppaṭai*" will put one in a deep meditative state of *camāti* (Sanskrit *samādhi*), the highest goal of yoga.[53] Rather than Tamil intuition or research penetrating to the divine center of the physical cosmos, physical nature itself, in the form of a mere creeper, stimulates the deepest states of human insight in these pre-modern texts.

For contemporary *vaidyas* and revivalists, the siddhars' mastery of their bodies and nature produces a similarly effective, though transformed, narrative. First, they controlled themselves and their actions, a control that is often translated into the "duty"

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[51] In the *Yoga Sutras* attributed to Patanjali, for example: "from perfect discipline of the circle of the navel, one has knowledge of the body's arrangement." *Yoga Sutra* 4.29. See *Yoga: Discipline and Freedom: The Yoga Sutra Attributed to Patanjali*, trans. Barbara Stoler Miller (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

[52] "āṟṟaluṭaṉitaiyaṟintu ceyvāyāṉāl, appaṉē riṣicittaṉāvāy kūṟē." "Akastya Muṉivar Aruḷiya Kaṟpa Muppu Kuru Nūl 100," 11.

[53] "Kailāca Caṭṭamuṇināyaṉār Aruḷicceyta Kaṟpaviti 100" [Kailāca Caṭṭamuṇi's 100 Verses on Rejuvenative Medicines"], verse 77, in *Patiṉeṇ Cittarkaḷ Vaittiya Cillaṟaik Kōvai, Iraṇṭām Pākam* [A Collection of Medical Tidbits of the Eighteen Siddhars, Volume 2], (Ceṉṉai: Tāmarai Nūlakam, 1996), 479.

Tamils owe their tradition. Like the siddhars, Tamils must reject the wanton sexuality and material desires, this time embodied in Western culture, and follow traditional ways. The siddhars' bodily mastery is the basis for their medical authority. In conquering death, they have achieved the absolute limit of mastery that is the aspiration of all medicine and which signals a perfection of medicine.[54] Their mastery of nature is generally described as resulting from their deep insight into the natural laws that govern the cosmos, a characterization that asserts the scientific credentials of a medicine that is capable of bestowing immortality.

Though there are no medical texts attributed to him, Pāmpāṭṭi siddhar, "the siddhar who makes the snake dance," is one of the most popular siddhars. David Buck dates the writings of Pāmpāṭṭi siddhar to sometime between the 15th century (because he mentions a musket, *tuppākki*) and the 18th century.[55] His poems are memorized and recited by people throughout Tamil Nadu.[56] He characterized himself and the other siddhars as fully possessed of the *siddhis*.

> The eight mountains we'll take and throw like little balls;
> The seven seas we'll drink and then we'll burp;
> The innumerable grains of sand we'll count;
> Stand before the maharajan [great king, god, here, Shiva], and dance, snake, dance![57]

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[54] For death as that over which we have no mastery, see Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 70-72.

[55] David C. Buck, *Dance, Snake, Dance: A Translation with comments of the Song of Pāmpāṭṭi-cittar* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1976), xii-xiii.

[56] Mu. Varadarajan, *A History of Tamil Literature*, trans. E. Sa. Visswanathan (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1988), 185; Zvelebil, *The Poets of the Powers* (London: Rider and Company, 1973), 112-113; Buck, xiii.

[57] eṭṭu malaikaḷaip pantāy eṭuttu eṟikuvōm
ēḻukaṭalaiyum kuṭittu ēppamiṭuvōm
maṭṭuppaṭā maṇalaiyum maṭittu viṭuvōm
makārācaṉ muṉpunī niṉṟu āṭu pāmbē.

Pāmpāṭṭi siddhar, verse 28, in *Cittar Pāṭalkaḷ: Periya Ñānak Kōvai* (*Songs of the Siddhars: The Garland of Great Knowledge*), ed. Ṭā. Māṇikkavāsakaṉ (Chennai: Uma Publishers, 1995), 427.

> In the mountain called eternity we stood fast;
> We accomplished whatever we thought; we were purified;
> Truthfully, our body won't be destroyed;
> We'll even live forever, so dance, snake! dance![58]

These powers are generally achieved through yogic practice, devotion to Shiva or Shakti, or, in the medical manuscripts, eating alchemical preparations. Thus Bhogar, one of the most popular of the medical siddhars, writes of a siddhar, "Because he did *puja*, worshipping Shakti's feet, he achieved extraordinary power (citti)."[59] The siddhis come not from individual effort here but because of the strength of devotion. In a text on "subtle *muppu*" (*cūṭca muppu*), Agastya speaks of a medicine called "*vañciṉi*," prepared by combining mercury, a salt called "ām," and copper sulfate. On eating this, one can run all the way past the peak of Mt. Meru and will even see the siddhars, and will there have the opportunity to serve them![60]

This idiom of the mastery of nature is repeated throughout more recent literature of the siddhars. Contemporary *vaidyas* portray the siddhars as scientists whose rigid investigation, indeed, whose *research*, results in their mastery of nature. The siddhars

> had investigated and studied fully the cause and effect of diseases and all kinds of drugs, mineral and poisons; and thereby came to realize what is beneficial and what was not, to their existence in life. They can even, if they choose, retain their bodies for ages or disintegrate them at their will; and can also dematerialize or rematerialize their bodies as they like. Their

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[58] Nittiyameṉṉu malaiyil niṉṟukoṇṭōmyām
niṉaittapaṭiyē muṭittuniṉmala māṉōm
cattiyamāy eṅkaḷ kaṭantāṉ aḻiyātē
cantatamum vāḻvōm eṉṟu āṭupāmpē

Pāmpāṭṭi siddhar 77, trans. Buck, 94.

[59] "pūcittārcattiyaṉ pātameṉṟu pōṟṟiṉārākaiyāṟ cittiyāccu..." "Bōganāyaṉār Aruḷicceyta Pūjāviti 37" ["Bogar's 37 Verses on Techniques of Worship"], verse 31, in *Patiṉeṇ Cittarkaḷ Vaittiya Cillaṟaik Kōvai, Iraṇṭām Pākam*, 380.

[60] "Agastiyar Cūṭca Muppu 32" ["Agastya's 32 Verses on Subtle Muppu"], verses 29-30, in *Akastiyar muppu cūttiraṅkaḷ* [Agastya's Texts on Muppu], ed. Es. Pi. Rāmaccantiraṉ (Chennai: Tāmarai Nūlakam, 1994), 122.

> knowledge of the inherent nature and the therapeutic and magnetic effects of different drugs, combined with the practice of regulating their breathing in vasi yogam [yoga of the breath], is supposed to give them longevity and superhuman powers quite beyond our comprehension.[61]

Beyond our *limited* comprehension, certainly, but not beyond comprehension *per se*. The extraordinary powers of the siddhars are not transgressions of natural laws, but rather are made possible by their exhaustive knowledge of nature and its principles. This insight is often spoken of in physiological terms.

> The seat of the inner eye is in between the two eyebrows. The siddhars who conquered death and attained perfection in life had developed the inner eye or wisdom eye which revealed to them the great truth about the inner mechanism of human life, valuable medicinal properties of herbs as well as the invisible objects and secrets of the heavenly bodies.[62]

What differentiates the siddhars from modern scientists is not that they transcend the dictates of natural law, but that they realize that natural law is not limited to physical processes. Their perception extends beyond the five physical senses, as they have developed the an "inner eye" which does not reveal illusion but "great truth." It is this sort of instrument, not possessed by modern scientists, through which the "inner mechanism of human life," "invisible objects," valuable medicines and even the distant stars are known. The deficiencies of science are exposed in the clearly superior faculties available to the siddhars, faculties which enable knowledge of the universe beyond the imagination of scientists. The knowledge that they perceive is "true," adhering to natural laws, but differs from Western scientific knowledge in its recognition of internal processes.

Because of their perfect knowledge of nature, T. V. Sambasivam Pillai considers the siddhars to be "the greatest scientists in ancient times. Their works in Tamil are

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[61] T. V. Sambasivam Pillai, *Tamil-English Dictionary,* 2083-2084.

[62] Velan, 38.

supposed to be more valuable than many that have been written in Sanskrit; and they are said to be works less shackled by the mythological doctrines of the original ayurveda."[63] The celebration of the siddhars as scientists not only meets the competition of biomedicine, then, but also responds to the challenge posed by ayurvedic practitioners. Indeed, it is the particularly *Tamil* science of the siddhars that makes their extraordinary accomplishments possible.

> The said animated mercurial pills according to Siddhar's process would, if retained in the throat, not only enable one to travel in the aerial regions, but also neutralize the action of fire, dematerialize the body, lead one to the path of wisdom, throws the Astral light and serve for various other purposes. No books so far, either in Sanskrit or in any other language except in Tamil Siddha works could be found treating on such a subject; and no nation in the whole world except Tamilians, was aware of this wonderful art. This in itself is a sufficient proof that the highest attainments of the Siddhars in spiritual science are marvelous and awe inspiring.[64]

More interesting than the simple claim *that* the siddhars have mastered worlds are the *ways* that they are said to have conquered these worlds, and the *characteristics* given to these worlds. In line with the demands of revivalist formulations of tradition, recent accounts of the siddhars' mastery of nature stress the scientific and Tamil character of this mastery. Already in their superior control of nature, the siddhars have laid the groundwork for the hope of all siddha *vaidyas*, that their knowledge will eventually "master" today's global medical world as well.

5.6 Siddhars and the Mastery of Society

The siddhars' mastery is not limited to their bodies, their minds, or even to nature, but extends to social norms within Tamil society. Pre-modern writings attributed to the

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[63] T. V. Sambasivam Pillai, *Tamil-English Dictionary*, 2083.

[64] Ibid., 2090.

siddhars emphasize their disregard for caste and religious activity mediated by brahmans. Their protest against brahmanic claims to ritual and social preeminence make them eminently suitable for inclusion in the non-brahman genealogy of the Tamil race. The siddhars were "rationalists and rejected all types of rituals and ceremonies."[65] Kamil Zvelebil describes the writings of the siddhars in a way that just as accurately applies to the writings of E.V.R. and Maraimalai Adikal. Their poems are "a protest, sometimes expressed in very strong terms, against the formalities of life and religion; rough handling of priests and brahmins in general; denial of the religious practices and beliefs of brahmanism, and not only that: an opposition against the generally pan-Indian social doctrine and religious practice; protest against the abuses of temple-rule; emphasis on the purity of character. . . .[66] The siddhars, in other words, are beyond the social norms that structure their society.

Typical of these siddhar poets, Civavākkiyar rejects the same religious forms that Tamil revivalists later attack as foreign elements in the Tamil community. Kamil Zvelebil dates Civavākkiyar to the 10th century C.E., given the style of the language of his poems.[67]

> "What are temples, tell me! And what are sacred tanks?
> O you poor slaves who worship in temples and tanks!
> Temples are in the mind. Tanks are in the mind.
> There is no Becoming, there is no Unbecoming, none, none whatever![68]
>
> Why, you fool, do you utter mantras, murmuring them, whispering,
> going around the fixed stone as if it were god, putting garlands of flowers
> around it?

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[65] Varadarajan, 184-85.

[66] Kamil Zvelebil, *The Smile of Murugan: On Tamil Literature of South India* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), 218.

[67] Zvelebil, *The Poets of the Powers*, 80-81.

[68] Civavākkiyar 33, in ibid., 83.

> Will the fixed stone speak -- as if the Lord were within?
> Will the cooking vessel, or the wooden ladle, know the taste of the curry?[69]

Civavākkiyar criticizes practices characteristic of brahmanical Hinduism, chastising that those who attend only to the externals of worship have no true connection to the divine. Over half a millennium later, in the Ñānaveṭṭiyāṉ, a work of the 16th century, the siddhar Vaḷḷuvar writes, "While we worship the *ātmaliṅga* within us, these Brahmins worship a *liṅga* made of stone."[70] Vaḷḷuvar posits a clear social divide between brahmans and "us," a distinction based on their different approaches to religious practice, a distinction that was later emphasized in distinguishing a Tamil non-brahman ethnic community. It is unclear who the "us" is, but it most likely refers to Vaḷḷuvar's own *śāmbhavan* caste, a caste that buries carcasses and cremates corpses, which he celebrates throughout the text at the expense of upper castes.[71] Siddha *vaidyas* today likewise depict the siddhars as representing the lower castes of Tamil society, usually in the idiom of "the common people." Mu. Varadarajan, in his *History of Tamil Literature*, writes that the language of the siddhars was "easily understood by the people... Even today such cittars' poems are sung by street singers in Tamil Nadu." The siddhars are Tamils who identify with the lower castes, the very communities that the non-brahman Tamil revivalists are trying to win to their vision of Tamil society.

While Vaḷḷuvar distinguished segments of society in accordance with caste, most siddhar writings seeks to efface, not support, caste differences. Civavākkiyar writes,

> What does it mean -- a Pariah woman?
> What is it -- a Brahmin woman?
> Is there any difference in flesh, skin or bones?

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[69] Civavākkiyar 496, in ibid., 87.

[70] Ñānaveṭṭiyāṉ 527. The liṅga is a phallus that represents Shiva; the ātmaliṅga is a concept in which the internal source of life is conceived as a liṅga. Quoted in Venkatraman, 151.

[71] Ibid., 150.

> Do you feel any difference when you sleep with a Pariah or a Brahmin woman?[72]

Vaḻḻuvar elsewhere explicitly denies the boundaries of caste as a legitimate marker of social difference.

> It is true that different species of the animal kingdom cannot procreate by copulation, but it is not so if a Brahmin cohabits with a Paḻaiya woman. So there is no caste in the world except the males and the females.[73]

On the whole, the siddhars meant to dispense of caste hierarchies. Tamil revivalists, on the other hand, emphasize caste difference as a basis of ethnic and racial difference, extending social distinctions in an effort to invert established hierarchies.

It is difficult to sustain the view voiced in revivalist discourse that the writings of the siddhars represent a rationalization of South Asian religion. Indeed, they substitute one hidden quantity, the material efficacy of ritual and symbolic constructions, with another, a direct encounter with god.[74] Their critique, then, was not of mystical processes in general but of particular, physical technologies – rituals, temples, texts, etc. – that were controlled by brahmans. This rejection of external religious activity is accompanied by the celebration of internal processes which are less directly subject to control by others. The move from external to internal is a move to regain control of a religious world over which brahmans claim a monopoly. The siddhars' caricature of the exclusive *physicality* of Hindu ritual will be echoed in later Tamil revivalist critiques, not only of the "empty" rituals mediated by brahmans but also of Western science's ignorance of the divinity of the cosmos.

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[72] Civavākkiyar 38, in Zvelebil, *Poets of the Powers*, 84-85. The Pariah, or Paḻaiya, caste is one of the untouchable castes.

[73] Ñānavettiyāṉ 625, 633. Quoted in Venkatraman, 151.

[74] In this they diverge from the strict materialism of lokāyata, a doctine of the Cārvāka school that dates to the time of the Mahābhārata. The Cārvākas only accepted the authority of pratyakṣa, literally, what is "before the eyes," as a means (pramāna) to knowledge, denying the validity of spoken authority (śabda), analogy (upamāna) and even inference (anumāna).

Contemporary *vaidyas* continue to assert that the "inner eye" or "sixth sense" of the siddhars is beyond both perception and the dictates of a brahman elitism that limited religious achievement to upper castes.

> With the sixth sense, siddhars are those who are successful in their attempts to attain the power which moves the world. . . Through their learning and experience, the siddhars have mastered great knowledge. So that ordinary people can obtain the permanent bliss which they acquired, they described the method to acquire that power in the form of songs. All those verses are the invaluable treasure of the holy Tamil land (*tamiḻttirunāṭu*). The special characteristic of siddhars is that they have attained the divine state of permanent bliss. Realizing this divine state within themselves, the siddhars transcend religion [*camayam*] and ritual.[75]

This transcendence is made possible by the dismissal of the physical technologies of worship as unimportant, by the location of divinity within each individual self, and by the assertion that the method to acquire "great bliss" and the "power that moves the world" is contained in the verses of the siddhars. These verses, of course, are in Tamil, not Sanskrit, verses which are in the colloquial language of rickshaw drivers, street vendors, and others who compose the target audience of this rhetoric.

The siddhars' "sixth sense," then, not only penetrates to the true state of nature but also to the true nature of society. It affirms that the preeminence claimed by brahmans is illusory, and so it undermines caste hierarchy. At the same time, contemporary promoters of a pure Tamil tradition draw on the siddhars' writings to unify "ordinary people" in non-brahman or even anti-brahman solidarity, effectively reinscribing the very divisions that the siddhars claimed to see beyond. In this sense, these narrations of the feats of the

[75] "anta āṟāvatu aṟiviṉ tuṇaiyāl ulakai iyakkikkoṇṭirukkiṟa pērāṟṟalai (aruḷai) aṭaiya muyaṉṟu veṟṟipeṟṟavarkaḷ cittarkaḷ... pēraṟivait tammuṭaiya paṭippaṟivālum paṭṭaṟivālum kaivarappeṟṟavarkaḷē cittarkaḷ. ivvāākat tāṅkaḷ peṟṟa nilaitta pēriṉpattai makkaḷum peṟum poruṭṭu anta āṟṟalai īṭṭiya vaḻimuṟaikkāṉa neṟikaḷai ellām pāṭal vaṭivil tantirukkiṟārkaḷ. antap pāṭalkaḷ aṉaittum tamiḻttirunāṭṭiṉ vilainitippaṟṟa kaḷañciyamākum. nilaitta pēriṉpam peṟum nilaiyai 'iṟainilai' eṉṟu cittarkaḷ kuṟippiṭṭuḷḷaṉar. cittarkaḷ tamuḷ irukkum 'iṟainilai'yai uṇarntu camayam, caṭaṅku mutaliyavaṟṟaik kaṭantu niṟpavarkaḷ" *Tamiḻ (Citta) Maruttuvak Kōṭpāṭu*, 5.

siddhars are rhetorical, intended to unify an audience in a community of identity, and at the same time they provide the content for that identity, which in this case is the content of Tamil revivalism.

5.7 Siddhars and the Mastery of the World

While both the medieval siddhar poets and their contemporary commentators reject the dictates of brahmanical religion and caste distinction, recent writers also exalt the siddhars on the world stage, as not only masters of their own society but as masters of the societies of the world. Their mastery of the ancient world is predicated on the narrative of Tamil civilization as the impetus for all civilization and science. In his massive work on the history of siddha medicine, commissioned by the government of Tamil Nadu for use in the education of students studying for a diploma of siddha medicine, N. Kandaswamy Pillai depicts the siddhars as the authors of all the world's civilization. "The racial memory of Tamilians and some section of the Egyptians speaks of a very ancient period in the human history in which civilised people from the submerged Tamil continent came to Egypt led by Siddhas, and laid the foundations of a civilization which is the mother of all modern civilizations."[76]

In the terms of South Asian notions of the continuity of knowledge, i.e., *paramparai*, the lineages of all the sciences originate with the siddhars, but only the Tamil sciences recognize this fact.

> All of today's research methods in chemistry came into being on the basis of the chemistry research conducted by the siddhars. It is an established historical truth that the siddhars' research methods in chemistry spread to the Western countries by way of the Turks, Arabs, Greeks and Romans. Therefore, it is completely appropriate to consider the siddhars to be the pioneers of chemical science.[77]

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[76] N. Kandaswamy Pillai, 313.

[77] "iṉṟaiya iracāyaṉa ārāycci muṟaikaḷ ellām cittarkaḷ ceyta iracāyaṉa ārāyccikaḷiṉ aṭippaṭaiyiliruntu uṇṭāṉavaitāṉ. cittarkaḷiṉ iracāyaṉa ārāycci muṟaikaḷ yavaṉarkaḷ, arēpiyar, kirēkkar,

In specifying Tamil knowledge as the root and essence of all modern science, Cuppiramaṇiyam lobbies for its prestige in an environment in which Tamil traditions of alchemy and medicine have been discounted as false or superstitious. The siddhars here are not just the founders of Tamil science but the founders of science *per se*. This narrative is not only of Tamil origins but of the origins of all science, a *totalizing* discourse that makes all science, even Western science, properly Tamil.

In Tamil revivalist logic, history devolves and so all scientific traditions are degenerate versions of the Tamil original. However, some *paramparais* are less degenerate than others, and it is siddha medicine that most fully embodies the foundational knowledge of the siddhars. "Though the Siddhas and their cult are spread over the whole world and the glimpses of their existence were seen in all ages, Tamilians used to claim closer relationship with them because of the land of their origin and continuous existence of their cults in Tamil land."[78] Among all the scientific traditions of the modern world, Tamil tradition has the best *memory* of the source of all science, and so it must also be the basis of any attempt to recover this original perfection.

The siddhars' mastery of the world is related to their mastery of nature by more than a common metaphor. Often, the celebration of the extraordinary powers of the siddhars is juxtaposed with the technical accomplishments, or lack thereof, of other societies.

> The "cittu" is called the atom, the smallest yet complete particle. Modern scientists have been immersed in unceasing research to know better these small particles. But from the conception of time, our great siddhars have succeeded in this as a result of their extensive research. In this research, they split atoms and combined atoms using the fine instruments of the

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rōmāṉiyar mutalāṉa piṟa nāṭṭavarkaḷ mūlamāka mēl nāṭukaḷilum ceṉṟu paraviyatu eṉpatutāṉ varalāṟu kūṟum uṇmai. atanāl iracāyaṉa cāstirattiṉ muṉṉōṭikaḷē cittarkaḷtāṉ eṉṟu kūṟuvatu muṟṟilum poruntum." Mē. Cī. Cuppiramaṇiyam, 10.

[78] N. Kandasamy Pillai, 315.

> grinding stone, rolling pin, etc., and they attained greatness resulting from this research. They would roam for millions of years, emerge from their state of meditative bliss (*camāti*) and take on an indestructible body, and would give darshan.[79]

The siddhars, Piḷḷai argues, did all that modern scientific researchers do, yet they did it thousands of years ago. They did it with less, making all the same discoveries with primitive technologies. They also did *more* than "modern science," living for millions of years in deathless bodies. In the context of a narrative of Tamil tradition, Piḷḷai's celebration of the siddhars and his critique of modern science do not simply claim the relative glory of the siddhars' knowledge but also argue for its universal applicability and global relevance.

Piḷḷai describes the method of the siddhars as "research" (*āyvu*), the same word which describes modern academic or scientific methods. So while he argues that Tamil science, not Western science, should set the universal criteria for truth, he employs the language of this Western science in describing and validating Tamil science, implicitly acknowledging that all forms of knowledge that intersect with the Western sciences must in some way justify themselves in terms of these sciences. What results is an explanation of extraordinary accomplishments in quasi-scientific terms, an explanation that aims to enhance the value of the extraordinary, not to make it more ordinary. Piḷḷai seeks to elevate "siddhar science" to a position above Western science, since the siddhars have *already* achieved all that Western scientists might achieve, and much more.

What sort of research did the siddhars do? While it is in part research that uses instruments and testing, it also employs the inner eye and intuition. The ancient siddhars were men of "very high culture and intellect," and their methods "are of a high degree of perfection and many of which cannot be solved by even Modern Scientists, because they

[79] P. Muttukkaruppa Piḷḷai, 36.

truly had an encyclopoedic mind guided by intuition."[80] Their perfect knowledge of natural processes, both physical and non-physical, through extraordinary means, meant that they were not limited to the ordinary rigors of modern science.

> They arrived at conclusions . . . from introspective reflection and mental vision rather than by the toilsome and tedious researches of the laboratory from the imaginary knowledge rather than intuitional one. So the only conclusion to be arrived at lastly, is the spiritualism which is the real, and in that reality, they saw further and deeper beyond the ordinary comprehension, and achieved more than it would have been possible for the West.[81]

The accomplishments of Tamil science are achieved through the power of the Tamil intellect, while those of Western science are won through mechanical apparati. Pillai contrasts "the spiritualism which is the real" with the "tedious" material researches of Western scientists that bring "imaginary knowledge," thereby inverting the values that the critics of Tamil tradition would tend to associate with "real" and "imaginary." His stereotypes of the West are typical of a "reverse Orientalism" that I earlier described as a strategy for defending tradition, according to which the essence of all things Western is materialistic, superficial, and mechanical, knowing "only the dead body of man and not the living image in him presented by Nature."[82] The siddhars are not only the historical founders of science but also the exemplary models of what it means to be scientific. If the most powerful forms of mastery comes through mental superiority and not technical superiority, there is perhaps hope, given the clear mechanical advantage of the West, that the Tamil sciences might again assume their prior and rightful position at the apex of the world's sciences.

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[80] T. V. Sambasivam Pillai, *Tamil-English Dictionary,* 2108.

[81] Ibid., 2111.

[82] Ibid., 2106.

This is to say that the siddhar sciences represent not only the past of all sciences but their future as well. In its historical role, Tamil tradition is the origin of Western science, and in its ancient glory it is an inspiration to what Western science, or a degenerate contemporary siddha medicine, might achieve in the future. Insofar as technological achievements are perhaps any science's most persuasive claim that it successfully represents truth, comparisons of the extraordinary abilities of the siddhars with Western technologies are repeated throughout revivalist literature.

> We know how to make this *iracamaṇi* pill from Tirumūlar's 8000 verse text, and we know that at the beginning of time, the siddhars circled many worlds. While today Westerners (*mēl nāṭṭiṉar*) think of going to celestial bodies in their rockets with scientific methods, our siddhars went to the moon and other worlds thousands of years before with the help of the *kavaṉa* pill. When will the day come when Tirumūlar's 8000 verse text, which contains all these details, will be published? That will be a great day for our medical world. Long live the siddhars, geniuses who have seen worlds beyond the reach of scientists! Long live the arts of the siddhars![83]

The dearth of historical evidence concerning the siddhars and their feats is exploited to make extraordinary claims, but also lamented because these feats therefore lack legitimacy in the eyes of the world. "There is historical evidence that in the fifteenth century Leonardo DiVinci built a flying machine. But, the historical event that the siddhar Bhogar made a flying machine a few centuries prior to that, and flew to China with that machine, is without support. What a tragedy that is!"[84] Nature may abhor a

[83] "tirumūlar eṇṇāyirattiliruntu ittakaiya iracamaṇi ceymuṟaiyum, ātikālattil cittarkaḷ pala aṇṭaṅkaḷellām cuṟṟi vantiruppataiyum nām terintu koḷḷukiṟōm. ikkālattil viññāṉa muṟaiyil mēl nāṭṭiṉar 'rākkeṭ''kaḷiṉ mūlam viṇṇiluḷḷa aṇṭattait tāvippiṭikka niṉaikkumpōtu, nam cittarkaḷ pal āyiram āṇṭukaḷukku muṉpē kavaṉa kuḷikaiyiṉ utaviyāl cantiramaṇṭalam mutaliya ṇṭaṅkaḷukkuc ceṉṟa ceyti cūṟappaṭṭiruppatāl tirumūlar eṉṉāyiram muṟṟilum kiṭaittu veḷiyiṭappaṭum nāḷ ennāḷō? annāḷē nam maruttuva vulakiṟku naṉṉāḷām. viññāṉikaḷ kāṇamuṭiyā aṇṭaṅkaḷaik kaṇṭa meññāṉa cittarkaḷ vāḻka. vāḻka cittar kalai." Ā. Caṉmukavēlaṉ, "Tirumūlar Aruḷiya Maruttuvat Tirumantiram 8000," 53.

[84] "patiṉaintām nūṟṟāṇṭil liyāṉārṭō ṭāviṉsi eṉpavar oru piṟakkum iyantirattaik kaṭṭiṉār eṉpataṟku varalāṟṟuc cāṉṟu uḷḷatu. āṉāl ataṟkum cila nūṟṟāṇṭukaḷukku muṉpē pōkar eṉṉum cittar oru paṟakkum iyantirattait tayārittu ataṉ mūlam cīṉāviṟkup paṟantu ceṉṟār eṉpataṟku varalāṟṟu ātāram illāmal pōy viṭṭatē eṉpatai niṉaikkumpōtu evvaḷavu vētaṉayāka irukkiṟatu?" Mē. Cī. Cuppiramaṇiyam, 14.

vacuum, but Tamil revivalists do not. Just beyond the limits of historical knowledge is where non-brahman authors locate the glories of Tamil society.

The siddhars, then, master not only nature and the world, but time itself. They are the origins of science and its highest aspirations for the future. In achieving immortality, they have already achieved timelessness, in that to be immortal is to have already survived forever, that is, to stand outside of history. This, it seems, is also the claim and hope of siddha *vaidyas* for their medical tradition, and of Tamil revivalists for Tamil tradition as a whole. Tradition is, in T. V. Sambasivam Pillai's words, a "real science" because it "holds good at all times – the past, the present and the future. The facts well-ascertained in our ancient books of some thousands of years ago have never been disputed or in any way criticized and so cannot lose their ground being nothing short of truths, and nothing but absolute and universal truths."[85] The characterization of the siddhars and Tamil tradition as timeless and immortal is, perhaps, less a description of history than it is a hopeful vision for a lineage of Tamil knowledge whose future, given the forceful challenge of biomedical technology, seems uncertain.

5.8 Conclusion

What is the relation between the mastery of nature, the mastery of society, and the mastery of the world? Non-brahman Tamil authors are acutely aware that the development of technological superiority, in the form of means of production, or military machinery, or computer finesse, is an advantage in a competitive world market. In the competition over the medical resources of South India, siddha practitioners have found themselves at a disadvantage in their bid for international, and even national, assistance in developing a "traditional" medical system on the scale of biomedical development over the last century.

[85] T. V. Sambasivam Pillai, *Tamil-English Dictionary,* 2123.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno speak of the enlightenment project to demystify and subsequently to master nature. For them, Francis Bacon best embodies the goals of the enlightenment, primary of which is the "happy match between the mind of man and the nature of things."[86] But Bacon's optimism was premature, and Horkheimer and Adorno add:

> The concordance between the mind of man and the nature of things that he had in mind is patriarchal: the human mind, which overcomes superstition, is to hold sway over a disenchanted nature. Knowledge, which is power, knows no obstacles: neither in the enslavement of men nor in compliance with the world's rulers. . . . Kings, no less directly than businessmen, control technology; it is as democratic as the economic system with which it is bound up. . . . What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men. That is the only aim.[87]

This has been borne out by history with European imperialism, with American domination of trade, and, in medicine, with the explosive global development of biomedicine at the expense of indigenous medical practices.

Siddha practitioners are acutely aware of the challenge presented by both ayurveda and especially biomedicine, and by the scientific, institutional, and political authorities and structures that support the claims of their opponents. Also aware that technological mastery translates to social control, they claim a legacy of a mastery of nature far superior to that displayed by contemporary technologies. However, their present lack of such mastery in comparison to Europe and America is blinding, compelling a discourse that recoils from the present and locates Tamil technical achievements in the past, in the future, and in the extraordinary powers of the siddhars.

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[86] Francis Bacon, "In Praise of Human Knowledge," in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. Basi Montagu (London, 1825), vol. 1, 254. Quoted in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972 [1944]), 3.

[87] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972 [1944]), 4.

This claim for technological mastery is a claim for the value of Tamil society vis-à-vis other societies. It is an attempt to win a position of respect for Tamil language, culture, and individuals equal to that of other societies.

CHAPTER SIX

SECRECY, HEREDITARY EDUCATION, AND THE IMMORTAL TRADITION

In defending their knowledge and practice, siddha practitioners evoke the extraordinary healing potential of siddha medicine, a potential which includes cures for cancer and AIDS and even promises bodily immortality. Given the blatant gap between this potential and the cures which are currently realized in practice, what makes these claims of extraordinary healing potential appear to be possible, or even reasonable? What are the strategies that siddha practitioners employ to convince themselves and their potential clientele that their medicine might indeed cure every disease they might contract? We have seen that Tamil revivalists imagine an ancient Tamil society beyond empirical data. In so doing, they have been able to imbue this civilization with certain romantic attributes such as perfect harmony, perfect rationality, and perfect health. Another way that siddha practitioners have positioned their knowledge beyond the bounds of empirical knowledge is by describing this knowledge as obscured, actively concealed by *vaidyas* who protect their unique techniques, or by the siddhars who wished to maintain their preeminence over ordinary people. In this chapter I explore obfuscation as a strategy to garner authority, a strategy that has been employed to control the transmission of medical knowledge in South Asia for millennia.

6.1 The Authority of Secret Knowledge

Siddha *vaidyas* circumscribe their knowledge within a unique and bounded realm of tradition, making their practice less susceptible to the scrutiny of others. Perhaps in no way is this withdrawal from the penetrating, critical gaze of others more explicitly effected than in the active dissimulation of siddha medical knowledge. Secrecy assumes

effected than in the active dissimulation of siddha medical knowledge. Secrecy assumes an identity with boundaries, within which the secret is held in common. Thus, a secret can be "contained" by an individual or a group. The details of medical formulae, for example, can be envisioned as the unique possession of a society differentiated along ethnic, religious or linguistic lines. Georg Simmel points to the power of secrecy in encouraging social differentiation.

> The strongly emphasized exclusion of all outsiders makes for a correspondingly strong feeling of possession. For many individuals, property does not fully gain its significance with mere ownership, but only with the consciousness that others must do without it. The basis for this, evidently, is the impressionability of our feelings through *differences*. Moreover, since the others are excluded from the possession – particularly when it is very valuable – the converse suggests itself psychologically, namely, that what is denied to many must have special value. Inner property of the most heterogeneous kinds, thus, attains a characteristic value accent through the form of secrecy, in which the contentual significance of what is concealed recedes, often enough, before the simple fact that others know nothing about it.[1]

This notion that particular forms of knowledge can be *possessed* by a particular group is one of the premises of tradition. Because what is of value is jealously guarded, the converse also appears to be true, that what is uniquely possessed must therefore be valuable. This is certainly the case for siddha medical knowledge, which *vaidyas* celebrate as the unique possession of the Tamil people and, as such, imbue it with extraordinary efficacy. This possession of secret knowledge excludes others, and so is a marker of social differentiation. It also unites an internal, coherent community, and so is a vehicle of social integration. Finally, it asserts a hierarchy of the resulting social groups, in which those "insiders" are elevated in their unique possession of valuable knowledge over those who are excluded from the exclusive community of knowledge.[2]

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[1] Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans., ed., and with an introduction by Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1950), 332.

[2] See T.M. Luhrmann, "The Magic of Secrecy," in *Ethos* 17, no. 2 (June, 1989),144.

It is also important to note that the *value* of any tradition is not only determined by the community of that tradition. If outsiders are indifferent to, or even deride, a society's traditional knowledge, then this knowledge will not have much value in a world market. This lack of global value of a tradition will also affect its value within the particular community. With the spread of the influence of biomedical knowledge and its institutions, the scope of the market for medical knowledge has also become global. In this market, value is derived through the acceptance of knowledge beyond the boundaries of regional communities.[3] While siddha practitioners celebrate their medical knowledge as the unique possession of the Tamils, they also lament that this medicine has not achieved world-wide recognition.[4] Part of their goal, then, is to advertise their unique knowledge, to proclaim it to the world, even if in this proclamation, they admit that much of this knowledge is unknown to those outside of the Tamil world.

Simmel's remark that the *fact* of secrecy is often more important than the *content* of the secret is one that I support. Here I follow Hugh Urban in his treatment of secrecy in the Kartābhajā sect of Bengali tantrism. "It is generally more fruitful, I would argue, to turn the focus of our analysis away from the content of secrecy and instead toward the forms and the strategies through which secret information is concealed, revealed and exchanged."[5] The reason this might be more fruitful, I would further argue, is that such a study better reflects the actual discourses employed by *vaidyas* in their bid for authority.

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[3] Global forces have transformed more than just the *value* of traditional practices. Perhaps more significantly, the idioms in which local knowledge is imagined have also changed. What was formerly simply "knowledge" and "medical knowledge" is now "traditional knowledge" and "traditional medicine." In the case of siddha medicine, the boundaries of what constitutes the community of knowledge were expanded and the character of that commununity reimagined.

[4] A poignant example of this can be found in Gary Hausman's dissertation on siddha medicine. Hausman reports an encounter with a siddha *vaidya*, Dr. Balakrishan. On taking leave from each other, Dr. Balakrishnan offers to explain clearly some points of siddha medicine for 200,000 rupees. Hausman politely declines the offer. See Hausman, 16.

[5] Hugh Urban, *The Economics of Ecstasy*, 12.

I am not saying, of course, that siddha medicine has no content. Rather, in arenas of discourse that transcend local contexts – those which attempt to formulate *a* unified siddha medical *system* and argue for its modern relevance in national or global contexts – the particularities of siddha medical practice recede and the grander claims of the utopian potential of siddha medicine come to the fore. Siddha *vaidyas* often posit the promise of their practice not only beyond the critical gaze of the other. What is known, they lament, is only a dim shadow of the glory that siddha medicine once was and can be in the future, often compelling them to pay little regard to the tangible content of current medical practice.

6.2 The Hereditary Transmission of Knowledge

Prior to the eighteenth century, all medical knowledge in India was transmitted in *paramparais*, hereditary lineages. From the time that the first school of Indian medicine, organized along the lines of British education, was established in 1822, numerous schools, colleges, and universities of traditional medicine have been founded in various configurations throughout India. Today, while this mode of education carries the most authority in the eyes of the Indian government, many people continue to be educated in hereditary contexts and practice privately, as public medical institutions will only employ those with degrees recognized by the Indian government. There have been many attempts to register these hereditary practitioners by setting up certificate courses and subsequent examinations, but thousands of *vaidyas* continue to practice without state authorization.

For centuries in South India, the boundaries within which medical knowledge and practices have been shared are *paramparais* that traced their origins to one of the founding siddhars, Agastiyar, Bhogar, or another. All medical knowledge within the *paramparai* is considered to have been "seen" by the siddhar who is the first propagator of the lineage. The siddhars

> "merged with Virgin Nature to fathom her depths and span her expanse. At long last when they emerged with new light on their quests, people adored them as Siddhas – the accomplished ones. Their crystallized thoughts transcended time and spoke across centuries during which scores of disciples endeavored to unravel their mystic and cryptic utterances."[6]

The authority of individual *vaidyas*, then, is at least in part derived from the prestige of the *paramparai*, which is itself founded on that of the siddhars. Insofar as the individual *paramparai* has defined the boundaries within which medical knowledge is transmitted, this knowledge is generally considered to be uniquely possessed and exclusively employed by those within the *paramparai*. Thus, the medical landscape of Tamil medicine has been marked by a variety of practices and medical options.

This is not to say that the basic structure of medical knowledge did not overlap considerably across lineages. As Gananath Obeyesekere argues, medicine is "part of the public domain and, however, esoteric the medical theory, physician, patient, and community are linked together in an intersubjective network defining the nature of the symptoms as well as types of medicine and their relative efficacy."[7] Medicine and healing is implicated in culture, and so while the medical formulae among practitioners differ, there is much correspondence in the general features of indigenous South Asian medical practice. The Tamil palm-leaf manuscripts, attributed to different siddhars and representing the knowledge of different *paramparais*, detail similar methods of diagnosis (pulse reading, examination of feces, urine, and mucus, etc.) and similar views of the body (with 72,000 veins in which circulate three "doṣas," wind, bile and phlegm). This overlap in the forms of medical practice indicate that even though lineages have touted

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[6] K. R. Krishnan, "Siddha Medicine During the Period of the Marattias," in *Heritage of the Tamils: Siddha Medicine*, ed. S. V. Subramanian and V. R. Mathavan (Madras: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 1983), 55.

[7] Obeyesekere, 160.

the uniqueness of their knowledge, their boundaries have been porous enough to allow the exchange of ideas.

While the *form* of Tamil medical knowledge has been similar, the *details* of medical formulae vary widely. Thus the contemporary view that there has always been a "system" of siddha medicine comprised of separate *paramparai*s is an anachronism.

> The siddha system of medicine in the beginning was taught by 'Guru-Sishya' method only. Here, it is important to note that, the Siddha system of education in ancient Tamilnadu was not imparted or organized on the scale of mass education like schools and colleges, but the ideal of education is, to treat it as a secret and sacred process, for the reason that the process of individual growth (inner) can only be achieved by a close and constant touch between the teacher and the disciple in their personal relationship from which the whole world was excluded.[8]

The boundaries that defined what was "inner" were not only those of the individual student, but primarily delineate the intimate *relationship* between the guru and student. This intimacy is a key component of the hereditary transmission of siddha medical knowledge. While there are many written manuscripts in which medical knowledge was transmitted, the direct, physical (oral, aural, and tangible) relationship between guru and student gave greater control over the dispersal of knowledge. Ideally, knowledge would only be offered to a student after initiation (*tīṭcai*), ensuring that this knowledge stayed within the lineage. The concealing of siddha medical knowledge was always, and is still often, a strategy to highlight the unique medical techniques of independent *paramparai*s in a competitive medical arena.

The touchstone for the ancientness of siddha medical techniques is a corpus of palm leaf manuscripts attributed to the siddhars. Dating these texts is difficult to impossible, as they contain primarily medical formulae with some scattered references of

[8] V. R. Madhavan, "Medical Education of the Tamils," in *Heritage of the Tamils: Education and Vocation*, ed. S. V. Subramanian and V. R. Mathavan (Madras: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 1986), 227.

the exploits of the attributed siddhar author. As I mentioned before, I follow R. Venkatraman in dating the earliest medical manuscripts attributed to the siddhars to around the 15th century.[9] Most scholars of these manuscripts do not even attempt a date. For example, Vē. Irā. Mātavaṉ, one of the foremost authorities on siddha medical manuscripts, in his edition of *Agastya's 1500 Medical Verses*, cites precise dates given in the colophons of the extant manuscripts that he consulted, one from 1786, the other from 1844. He concludes that this text was in wide use 200 years ago, but does not venture a guess as to its approximate date of origin. "Because of its obvious widespread utility, the text must have been preserved *for ages* (*kālaṅkālamāka*) in manuscript form so that it was available in many places and as many manuscripts." [italics mine][10] The desire to depict siddha medicine as a timeless tradition, and the role of many manuscript scholars in the promotion of siddha medicine and Tamil tradition, has discouraged more precise dating of these texts.

Palm-leaf manuscripts have served as aids in the transmission of medical formulae for centuries. They also have been symbols of an ancient past, concrete evidence that one's medicines have a mystical, obscure origin. The *vaidya* who can read them demonstrates his literacy, though the sort of literacy thus demonstrated has changed, from literacy *per se* (the ability to read), which set him apart from his illiterate clientele, to literacy of *ancient tradition* which sets him apart from his contemporaries who may be more versed in Western education. Take, for example, the following description of a typical siddha practitioner of the late eighteenth century. "The doctor boasted of secret knowledge from a palm-leaf-book heirloom and quoted verses ostensibly from it, to impress his client, before he proceeded to make the remedy for a stipulated fee."[11] While

[9] Venkatraman, 115.

[10] Vē. Irā. Mātavaṉ, *Akattiyar Vaittiya Kāviyam 1500*, 11.

[11] Krishnan, 56.

the ability of the *vaidya* to *read* is no longer a cause for amazement, the ability to read a *palm-leaf manuscript,* the medium of ancient knowledge, continues to captivate observers. G. John Samuel, the founder and head of the Institute of Asian Studies, a large research institute just outside of Chennai that edits and publishes manuscripts, recounts his youthful observations of an astrologer. "I was amazed, watching him reading palm leaf manuscripts, searching them and then telling those who had come their horoscopes."[12]

The recording of medical knowledge in texts has been an enterprise fraught with the danger of leaking information to those outside of the *paramparai.* Thus *vaidyas* point out that their texts were written in obscure language, *paripāṣai,* and so they can only be deciphered by those students who have been taught the meaning of these esoteric words by a guru.

> There is no denying the fact that the fundamental principle underlying the process of calcination of the metals and the minerals successfully eliminating their evil effects but not losing at the same time their beneficial ones is a great secret; but the difficulty is that one has to learn the secret of manufacturing the Siddhic medicines from a learned and experienced Guru, since the correct scientific terminology of the different kinds of formulae relating to kalpa drugs was given in the ancient Siddha texts are not only fully comprehensive and expressive but also shrouded in symbolic words.[13]

Velan voices an opinion common to many hereditary *vaidyas* that siddha medical knowledge is *inherently* and exclusively suited to be taught by a guru, and that textual education is incapable of teaching the secrets that are transmitted in the traditional mode.

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[12] "avar ōlaiccuvaṭikaḷaip paṭittup paṭittut ta\u0331n\u0331n\u0331ai nāṭi varuvōrukkuc cōtiṭam kūṟuvataic ciṟuvayatil nā\u0331n\u0331 pārttu viyantirukkiṟē\u0331n\u0331." Ji. Jā\u0331n\u0331 Cāmuvēl, *Kumari Mutal Vārcā Varai: Paḻantamiḻc Cuvaṭikaḷai Tēṭi Orupayaṇam* [From Kanya Kumari to Warsaw: A Journey in Search of Ancient Tamil Manuscripts] (Ce\u0331n\u0331n\u0331ai: Āciyaviyal Āyvu Niṟuva\u0331n\u0331am, 1994), 3-4.

[13] Velan, 96.

A look at the palm leaf manuscripts sheds light on some of the meanings of secrecy in pre-colonial times. Here, the lines of secrecy were drawn in at least two different ways. First was a "horizontal" line drawn between types of beings, on the one side the ordinary *cum* extraordinary siddhars, the knowers, who concealed their knowledge from the ordinary people of the world. Second was a "vertical" line representing the descent of knowledge that occurred when individual siddhars "sung" their medical knowledge in texts. These palm-leaf manuscripts were passed to committed, ordinary people who employed this knowledge to become siddha *vaidyas*. This descent of knowledge (a descent in a hierarchy of beings) produced divisions of knowledge between individual *paramparai*s.

The text "Akastiya Mu̱nivar Kaṟpa Muppu Kuru Nūl 100," "Agastya's 100 Verses on the Regenerative Compound Muppu," narrates a typical story of Agastya's initial redaction of medical knowledge in textual form, a redaction that other siddhars strongly resisted.

> I say [this] in clear language to all of the wise people (*ñāṉikaḷ*) of the world. This text (*nūl*) is without equal among such texts. I collected information from many texts and wrote it in this one. If this text is not available to scholars, I previously gave a text [called] "205 [verses]", which is the first [text] in healing (*paṇṭitam*) and is the same as this one.... Knowing this, the siddhars, who were in a mountain cave, took this text and hid it in the cave. (66)
>
> I called the siddhars who had hid it and retrieved the text, telling them it is for the good people of the world. If those who know this well-balanced text on *muppu* don't reveal it to people who revile (*tiṭṭa*) the guru (*ai*), then they will become knowledgeable with the grace (*aruḷ*) of the undivided Shiva-Shakti. I have given the complete [formula] of the restorative medicine (*kaṟpam*) which gives the yogic powers (*citti*).[14]

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[14] "ulakattil ñāṉikaṭku uṟuticoṉṉēṉ
oppillai yinnūltāṉ nūṟṟukkuḷḷē
pala nūluñ curukkiyallō vitaṉaic coṉṉēṉ
paṇṭitattuk kātiyā yirunūṟṟaintu
kalakkamākac colliviṭṭē ṉitupōkum...
malaikkukayi liruntacitta rinta nūlai

The siddhars as a whole are portrayed as selfishly protecting the knowledge that separates them from ordinary people. It is the acquisition of the yogic powers, the eight *cittis* which distinguish one as a siddhar. The correct preparation and consumption of *muppu* will make an ordinary person a siddhar: "No one in the four [cardinal] directions knows this [method to prepare *muppu*]. I will sing this openly to you. If you understand this with skill, you too will become a rishi-siddhar!"[15] The siddhars, to protect their preeminence, do not wish others to have this knowledge.

What are these other texts that Agastya read? They are his own texts, general medical texts which were not specifically on *muppu*, indicating that this manuscript is a compilation of prior texts attributed to Agastya and so probably somewhat more recent than other manuscript texts. "I sang many great texts, noble one (Ayyā). I gathered the appropriate parts on *kaṟpam* that were in those texts, and I put them in this text without *paripāṣai* for the [immortal] survival of the people of the world."[16] Agastiya repeatedly

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vāṅkiyē maṟaittu vaittār kukaiyiṟ ṟāṉē. (66)

"vaittirunta cittarkaḷai aḷaittuk kaṇṭu
vāṅkiṉē ṉinta nūl nallōrkkeṉṟu
kaittiṭṭa māṉatoru vinta nūlaik
kaṇṭavarkaḷ kāṭṭārkaḷ karuttāṉeṉṟu
aittiṭṭa pērkaḷukku aṟivuṇṭākum
akaṇṭa puri pūraṇiyā ḷaruḷtaṉṉālē
cittiyiṭṭa kaṟpamatiṉ tīrkkañ coṉṉēṉ... (67)

"Akastiya Muṉivar Kaṟpa Muppu Kuru Nūl 100," verses 66-67, 41-42.

[15] nāṟṟicaiyi luḷḷavark laṟiyārappā
naṉṟāka vuntaṉukkut tiṟantucolvēṉ
āṟṟaluṭaṉitaiyaṟintu ceyvāyāṉāl
appaṉē riṣicittaṉāvāy kūṟē. (4)

"Ibid., verse 4, 11.

[16] pāṭiṉēṉ aṉēkanūl peritē ayyā
paṇpāka atilirunta kaṟpantaṉṉiṟ
kūṭiṉēṉ paripāṣai yillāmaṟṟāṉ
kuvalaiyattōr piḷaippataṟku intanūlait
tēṭiṉēṉ... (2)

Ibid., verse 2, 9-10.

contrasts his own openness to the jealousy of the other siddhars. The claim that his text is free of *paripāṣai* is an affirmation of the superiority of this text over other texts, whose meaning is obscured by *paripāṣai* and which therefore cannot be properly understood.[17] Indeed, Agastya has facilitated the work of *vaidyas* who seek to manufacture *muppu* by assembling all the information about medicines that promote longevity (*kaṟpam*), which were scattered throughout his other texts, and presenting it here in compact form.

In narrating the attempt of the other siddhars to hide this clear, direct text outlining the recipe of *muppu*, the author suggests the superiority of all knowledge attributed to Agastya. Accordingly, the other siddhars cannot be trusted because they do not want ordinary people to become siddhars – this is why they wrote their texts on *muppu* in *paripāṣai*. *Paripāṣai* is always attributed to the texts of *other* siddhars. Agastya claims, "I have not hidden [the formula of] *muppu*, but the [other] siddhars have hidden it in tens of millions of texts."[18] What Agastya means is that the other siddhars have hidden their knowledge such that no one will be able to decipher the formula. The implication is that even if another lineage, *paramparai*, has a text on *muppu*, they will not understand it because it is riddled with *paripāṣai*. In other words, the knowledge of other lineages is secret to everyone except the siddhars, so deeply obscure that the *vaidyas* themselves who possess these texts cannot decipher them. Only those who have this text by Agastiyar, or his text on *muppu* in 205 verses, will have any chance at properly preparing *muppu*.

While Agastya has revealed this knowledge to the *vaidya* who can read this text, he is also clear that the formula for *muppu* must be exclusively preserved within the

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[17] The word *paripāṣai* is also in Sanskrit (*paribhāṣā*), from "bhāṣā", language, and "pari", round about, opposite to, indirect. While in Sanksrit *paribhāṣā* means censure or technical language, the Tamil *paripāṣai* has a sense of "round about" language, indirect or obscure language.

[18] "ūrappā yikkuruvai yoḷikkavillai; vorukōṭi nūlukkuḷ ḷḷittār cittar." "Akastiya Muṉivar Kuru Nūl Muppu 50" [Agastya's Text in 50 Verses on Muppu"], verse 18, in *Akastiyar Muppu Cūttiraṅkaḷ*, 69.

paramparai, only passed to those who do not "revile the guru." This goes for all of the formulae he gives. "Don't reveal this [method to prepare the] *cavvīra parpam*[19] called "*veḷḷai*" to the people of the world."[20] The *vaidya* reading the text is not one of the "people of the world" (*mētiṉiyōr*), which would include both non-medical people and *vaidyas* of other lineages. Another siddhar, Bōgar, defines "people of the world" (*ulakattōrkaḷ*) as "those who die" (*cettārkaḷ*), distinguishing them from "those who serve the goddess Vālai (Uma)."[21] In light of contemporary depiction of the siddhars as representing the interests of ordinary people, Agastya's admonition to keep this knowledge from "those who die" appears somewhat surprising. For Agastya, the people who deserve benefit from his knowledge are a selected elite of *vaidyas* and those who can afford their medicines.

Perhaps more importantly, given the competitive medical environment in which these texts were composed and used, this preserve of the particular *paramparai* is distinguished from the medical space occupied by *vaidyas* of other lineages. Because the texts of other *paramparais* are obscured by *paripāṣai*, those other *vaidyas* might pretend to have knowledge of miraculous medicines but in fact do not. "I have revealed fully all kinds of medicines. Those who have not studied [this text] don't know what medicine is, or what *kaṟpam* is, but they speak as if they know. Those good people (*nallōr*) who know the meaning of this text will prepare the proper *kaṟpam*."[22] In other words, anyone who

[19] It is somewhat unclear what this medicine is, though it may be calcinated bisulphate of mercury. For different possibilities, and one method of preparation as set out in Agastya's "Poorna Sootram," see T. V. Sambasivam Pillai, *Tamil-English Dictionary*, 1962.

[20] "veḷḷaiyeṉṟa cavvīra paṟpantaṉṉai mētiṉiyōr taṅkaḷukku viḷḷātappā." "Akastiya Muṉivar Kaṟpa Muppu Kuru Nūl 100," 19.

[21] "Bōgaṉāyaṉār Aruḷicceyta Pūjāviti 37," verse 11, 375.

[22] "pūraṇattil cakalavaittiyamuṅ coṉṉēn
kallārkku maruntētu kaṟpamētu
kaimuṟaikaḷ terintatupōl pēcuvārkaḷ
nallōrkaḷitaṉporuḷai yaṟintukoṇṭu

has not had the privilege to be given the text by a guru in Agastya's lineage might act as *vaidyas*, proclaiming that they know about medicine, but only those who know what is set out in this particular text have real knowledge and will have success in preparing *kaṟpam*.

The preeminence which is offered by the secrecy of the *paramparai* is both epistemological and moral. Indeed, it is the moral rectitude of the student which earns him the right to learn rare medical knowledge, just as Agastya's text, and the original transmission from the realm of the siddhars, is only for "good people of the world". One must be wary of charlatans, the text warns, who are numerous.

> Those people who speak about the qualities of a guru and techniques [of medicine], without having read texts, they are blind. They know nothing of muppu, but they deceive the people of the world. Look! For these people, who know nothing of rock-salt (*kalluppu*), alchemy will not be [effective]. They roam around the streets like dogs. What sort of alchemy is there [i.e., will work] for those low-born people?[23]

Indeed, the only "secret" that these quacks possess is that they have no secret knowledge at all! For *vaidyas*, access to proper knowledge is an indication of a prior morality, while the possession of this secret knowledge is itself the primary sign that distinguishes them

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nāṭṭilē kaṟpamuṟai ceyvār pārē. (100)

"Akastiya Muṉivar Kaṟpa Muppu Kuru Nūl 100," verse 100, 58.

[23] "kuruvētō muṟaiyētō veṉpārāṉpar
kūṟiyatōr nūlkāṉār kuruṭṭuvāti
taruvāṉa muppūvai pārār māṉpar
tāraṇiyil maṉitarkaḷai mayakkuvārpār
uruvāṉa kalluppai yaṟiyamāṭṭār
uluttarukku vātamatu vuṇṭōyillai
teruvōṭē yalaikiṟatōr nāyaippōlē
ceṉmitta vacaṭarukku vātamētō." (16)

"Akastiya Muṉivar Kuru Nūl Muppu 50," verse 16, 68. Here, "low born" (ceṉmitta vacaṭar) is probably not a reference to particular castes, but rather used metaphorically to indicate immoral people. Unlike the broader siddhar literature, which contains often strident rejections of caste heirarchy, there are almost no references to caste in the medical manuscripts that I read. The reading of the medical siddhars as against elitism, and indeed the egalitarian nature of ancient siddha medicine, seems to be a modern invention. On the other hand, perhaps the lack of consideration of caste in the pre-modern transmission of esoteric knowledge is *already* radical.

as moral. The possession of secret knowledge creates a community of knowledge, the *paramparai*, set apart both in its superior mastery of medical preparations and in its superior morality.

Undermining the authority of other *paramparai*s is only part of the effort required to establish the authority of a particular lineage. Agastya predicated his authority not on his "scientific researches" but on his extraordinary relationship to Shiva and Shakti. "Holding the feet of Shakti in my mind, I saw the way to prepare *muppu* which is the path [to immortality?]."[24] Interestingly, indications that the compiler may have been an ordinary human and not Agastya himself come through, when he announces that he "worships the feet of the siddhars"[25] in telling this method, a strange action for the siddhar who is the most prolific, most important, and to many *vaidyas* most authoritative of them all.[26]

The narration of these disputes among the siddhars usually portrays the attributed author of the text at hand as happy to reveal knowledge which all the siddhars possess, while the other siddhars try to hide this text. These disputes among siddhars are not over differences in their knowledge, and so these texts do not elevate the knowledge of one siddhar over another. Rather, they narrate differences in the willingness of siddhars to *share* knowledge that they all have, and thus they posit differences in the clarity and value of the texts which they have written. As these texts are now imbedded in human practice, these differences highlight that the arena of contested knowledge outlined by the texts is

[24] "maṉōmaṇiyāḷ pātamatai maṉatilvaittu
mārkkamuḷḷa kurumuṭikka vakaiyuṅkaṇṭēṉ"

"Akastiya Muṉivar Kaṟpa Muppu Kuru Nūl 100," verse 3, 10.

[25] "Akastiya Muṉivar Kaṟpa Muppu Kuru Nūl 100," verse 6, 12.

[26] See, for example, the editor's preface to *Akastiyar Muppu Cūttiraṅkaḷ*, 5.

not in the imaginary world of the siddhars, but in the competitive medical world of the *vaidyas*.

In his 100 verse treatise on the formulation of *kaṟpam*, Kailāca Caṭṭamuṉi speaks of his dispute with the other siddhars. Once you have prepared the revitalizing *centūram*,[27]

> twenty days after taking it the [old] skin will fall off.[28] Once, all of the siddhars called [me] and spoke. When they asked, "the way to formulate this pill (*kuḷikai*) must be that of the knowledgeable Tirumūlar," I told them "it is our method," and they said to give the pill over to them and asked "who's method?" I told them it is the method of the great Caṭṭamuṉi. (64)
>
> They were in a conference (*capai*) on Mount Kailāsa (*kayilāya*) with the three great gods (*mūvar*) and Caṉaka, etc.[29] They asked what is my name, and asked "what is the method set out in Caṭṭamuṉi's text? Give the book to Koṅkaṇar and share your book, saying 'read it'." (65)
>
> It was Maccamuṉi who read the text and praised it to the assembly.... He said that I had told everything very directly, and in his arrogance he even tried to sing my book of 200 verses. In a half a moment, Maccamuṉi called me there. All of the siddhars, along with Caṉaka, etc., said, "Was the vow (*tīṭcai*) you spoke in the guru's right ear, the vow to observe [i.e., keep secret] his path, given in arrogance? Are you now a guru to the siddhars? Are you completely pushing aside those words? Are you arrogantly saying that all the siddhars are second-rate gurus?" (66-68)
>
> Hearing these words, as I stood stunned, Tirumūlar (Mūlakuru) took my text of 200 verses and tore it, ruining it. Then with the text I had sung in 2500 verses, he handed it to me, saying " it is only for good siddhars," and told me to hide it in a cave. Look, that book which the siddhars saw is the very same as this book [which you have in your hands]! (69)[30]

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[27] A red chemical preparation that was described in a prior section of the text.

[28] This is a good thing, as the old skin will be replaced by a new, younger one, or perhaps even a golden skin. This is one of the effects of karpam, rejuvenation medicines. See T. V. Sambasivam Pillai, *Tamil-English Dictionary*, 1790.

[29] The three gods are Brahma, Siva and Vishnu. Caṉaka, etc. refers to the four mind-born sages of Brahmā.

[30] koḷḷappāyirupatu nāḷ caṭṭaiyoṉṟupōkuṅ

Kailāca Caṭṭamuṉi is an upstart siddhar, a student of Agastiyar and therefore a secondary transmitter of siddha knowledge.[31] Maccamuṉi and Tirumūlar are here portrayed as his primary rivals, although all of the siddhars scold him. Consistent with other manuscript

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kūppiṭṭārcittarellām vārttaicolvār
viḷḷappālvarōṭē kuḷikaimārkkam
vētāntattirumūlar mārkkameṉṟāl
piḷḷappānammuṭaiya varkkameṉṟu
vōṭukiṟakuḷikaiyaittāṉ kaiyilīntu
naḷḷappāyāruṭaiya varkkameṉṟāl
nalamperiyacaṭṭamuṉi varkkameṉṉē. (64)

eṉṉavēyeṉṉuṭaiya nāmañcolli
veṭuttataṉaiccittarellā miyalpāyppēci
maṉṉavēcaṭṭaimuṉi nālukkuḷḷē [should read nūlukkuḷḷē]
vāmameṉṉaveṉṟucollik kēṭṭārākil
taṉṉavēcaṉakāti mūvarōṭu
capaiyākakkayilāyat tirukkumpōtu
paṉṉavēkoṅkaṉareṉ nūlaivaittup
paṭiyuṅkōḷeṉṟucollip pakuttiṭṭīrē. (65)

pakuttiṭṭanūleṭuttu maccamuṉitāṉum
pāṭiṉarcapaiyellām kēṭṭumecca... (66)

tōṇappāveṭṭaveḷi yākacconṉēṉ
coṉṉatoruyirunūṟu pāṭṭumpārttu
āṇappāyāṇavattāṟ coṉṉāreṉṟu
yaraiṭcaṇattileṉṉaiyaṅkē yaḷaiyeṉṟārē. (67)

aḷaittuyeṉṉaimaccamuṉi kūṭṭippōṉā[r]
rappavallōjaṉakāti cittarellām
kuḷaittakuruvalakkātil colluntīṭcai
koḷuppōṭāpāṭiṉatu veṉṟukēṭṭut
tuḷaittakurucittarukku nīrāṉīrō
coṟperiyapūraṇattait taḷḷinīrō
yiḷaittakuruvāṉārō cittarellām
yiṭumpōṭāpāṭiṉatu veṉacconṉārē. (68)

coṉṉamoḻikēṭṭacantu niṟkumpōtu
tuṭiyāṉamūlakuru yirunūṟumvāṅkip
paṉṉanallapāḷeṉṟuk kiḷittuppōṭṭār
pāṭiṉatōrirupattu yaintunūṟuṅ
kaṉṉanallacittarukkā meṉṟucolli
kaikoṭuttukukaikkuḷḷē vaiyumeṉṟār
iṉṉapaṭikaṇṭamuṉi nūltāṉcitta
rirupattuyaiṉūṟu vitutāṉpārē. (69)

"Kailāca Caṭṭamuṉināyaṉār Aruḷicceyta Kaṟpaviti 100," verses 63-69, 476-77.

[31] T. V. Sambasivam Pillai, *Tamil-English Dictionary*, 1790.

texts, Kailāca Caṭṭamuṉi portrays himself as a renegade who stands alone against other siddhars in recording medicinal formulae that are so valuable that they are jealously guarded by those who already know them. It is this claim that these texts are exclusive, rare and secret, that makes them seem valuable. While in contemporary Tamil revivalist discourse the siddhars are celebrated as having bestowed siddha medicine to all of Tamil (non-brahman) society in a spirit of compassion as the ancestors of the Tamil community, the manuscripts portray the siddhars on the whole as jealously guarding their secrets from ordinary people.

Every text attributed to one of the siddhars refers to the knowledge it contains as secret and valuable, knowledge which will not be found in any other text. The attempts of other siddhars to hide the lucid text highlights the veracity of its formulae and the power of its knowledge. After all, the siddhars would not have tried to hide the text if it did not reveal something important. Each text is an instance in which one siddhar broke ranks with others, and each text represents an exclusive connection between extraordinary siddhars and ordinary people. The effect of this descent of knowledge into the human realm, then, is to make the primary divisions of knowledge not that between siddhars and the human world, but that between *paramparai*s. Or rather, as a *paramparai* claims unobscured siddhar knowledge that other lineages do not have, the distinction between siddhars and ordinary people is effectively transformed into a difference between the *paramparai* and the rest of the world.

6.3 Esotericism, Miraculous Medicine, and the Possibility of Immortality

As we have seen before, the siddhars generally celebrate their texts as being clear, without the *paripāṣai* which riddles the texts of other siddhars. For the siddha *vaidya*

today who tries to formulate the most powerful medicines, either rejuvenative or alchemical, however, none of the manuscripts seem clear.[32]

> One of the reasons that the siddhars used esoteric language (*paripāṣai*) is so that others could not understand, as each siddhar used his own esoteric words. It is also because of this that siddha medicine cannot be produced correctly by those who are not appropriate, and why it cannot be employed correctly, why there is confusion among people.
>
> However, we are astonished when we hear of the miraculous work that has been accomplished by a few siddha *vaidyas*. An amount of medicine equal to a grain of rice can cure leprosy. It can change wrinkles and gray hair, restore youthfulness, and liberate from the grip of death. All of this is not fantasy. We know that these things have truly occurred.[33]

According to *vaidyas* today who try to interpret the writings of the siddhars, *paripāṣai* is the key that controls access to esoteric knowledge. In principle, only those who have the proper training, i.e., have studied under a guru, will know the exact referents to the *paripāṣai*, working on the assumption that each *paripāṣai* term has a precise and single correspondence to a specific substance. While the author here admits that the siddhars were so effective in their use of *paripāṣai* that they have created much confusion, he does

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[32] One of the features that distinguishes Tamil medical texts from others in South Asia is a much greater role of alchemy. David White, in his study of North Indian siddha writings, distinguishes therapeutic and alchemical writings, noting that while the former seek to alleviate suffering, the latter promise to transform the successful alchemist into an immortal siddha. Therapy, the province of Ayurvedic practitioners, primarily uses herbal preparations, while alchemy has been primarily carried out by yogis and alchemists who work with mineral substances. The siddha medical writings of South India are clearly different, as are contemporary practitioners, who consider immortality just the optimal state of bodily health, and who employ far more minerals in their medical preparations than do Ayurvedic *vaidyas*. David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 52.

[33] "cittarkaḷ paripāṣaikaḷai upayōkap paṭuttiyatum atilum ovvoruvar ovvoru vitamāṉa paripāṣaic coṟkaḷaip payaṉpaṭutti oruvar coṉṉatu iṉṉoruvarukkup puriyāta nilaiyai uṇṭākkiyatum oru kāraṇam eṉalām. citta maruttuvam takutiyaṟṟavarkaḷ kaiyil akappaṭṭuk koṇṭu muṟaiyākat tayārikkappaṭāmalum, muṟaiyākap payaṉ paṭuttappaṭāmalum makkaḷiṭaiyē kuḻappattiṉai uṇṭākkiyatum kāraṇamāka irukkalām."

"āṉāl citta maruttuvar cilar nikaḻttiya aṟputamāṉa ceyalkaḷaip paṟṟik kēḷvippaṭum poḻutu nāmē tikaittup pōkiṉṟōm. oru nel aḷavu parimāṇamuḷḷa maruntu kuṣṭa rōkattiṉaip pōkkiyatu. naraitiraikaḷai māṟṟiyatu, vālipattiṉai mīṭṭuk koṭuttatu, cāviṉ piṭiyil iruntu mīṭṭatu, eṉpavai ellām kaṟpaṉaikaḷ alla. uṇmaiyāka nikaḻntavai eṉṟu aṟikiṉṟōm." The editor's preface to *Akastiyar Muppu Cūttiraṅkaḷ,* 4-5.

affirm that he has "heard" of the miracles worked by some siddha *vaidyas*. It is this sort of testimony of that sustains the hopes of siddha *vaidyas* that their medical premises and texts may one day bring them fame and fortune.

There is often an assumption among *vaidyas* that at some time in the past, the meanings of *paripāṣai* were clearly known but have been *lost* with the passage of time. A formula given in a text is material evidence for a fantastic medicine that has been produced in the past and might, perhaps, be produced in the future. While impossible to demonstrate (and it is just this very impossibility that makes claims of the miraculous appear feasible), I argue that much, but not all, *paripāṣai* of the medical manuscripts has *never* been known to anyone, but has *always* been language that has no referent. If this is true, the secret has always been that which Agastya warned us with respect to other *paramparais*: that there *is no secret*, and that there are no miraculous medicines. The power of *paripāṣai*, then, has never been that of concealing true medical formulae, but of concealing the fact that there are no true medical formulae, inserting an obstacle between the *vaidyas'* comprehension and illusory substances that will produce gold out of mercury or cure all ills. The formulation of this illusory medicine, and all the wealth that it will bring, appear to be within the grasp of the *vaidya* if only the *paripāṣai* can be deciphered. *Paripāṣai* effects the *proximity* of the miraculous, tempting belief that it is only the proper interpretation of a single word that stands between us and the extraordinary. While obscure language makes comprehension impossible, and therefore appears to be the impediment to its formulation, it is the very same *paripāṣai* which enables the reader to imagine that the recipe given in the text that they have in their hands, if understood properly, will indeed produce these medicines.[34]

[34] Of course, the medical texts of the siddhars and the current practice of siddha *vaidyas* are not empty of content. Indeed, many people continue to be healed by the medicines which *vaidyas* produce. I have focussed on the medicines for which the most extraordinary claims are made, and I suspect that these medicines are the most "empty" of all siddha medicines, in accordance with the grandeur of the claims made for them.

As an example of the use of *paripāṣai* and its power to impart credence to the extraordinary, I will focus on a medicine called *muppu*. *Muppu*, all siddha *vaidyas* know, will cure all ills and bestow immortality, and so it is probably the most sought after of all medicines. Because it is shrouded in secrecy, however, its successful formulation is elusive. In the May, 1972 issue of the medical periodical Nandhi, Dr. Venugopal writes,

> In speaking of muppu, it will be a matter that ordinary people should not elaborate upon. It is a thing that one cannot easily grasp... The siddhars have explained the elucidation of *muppu* in *pāripāṣai*.... [Thus, siddha practitioners] have received the explanation either as a verbal account from generation to generation or by their individual tinkerings fully in the path of the siddhars, and the situation is such that other people cannot understand it fully.[35]

The formula for the preparation of *muppu* is a curious sort of secret, in that it is not clear that *anyone* today knows it. M. Shanmukavelu, a siddha practitioner attempting to formulate *muppu* based on Agastya's texts, frustrated with his lack of success, disputes Agastya's proclamation that he has openly revealed the formula for *muppu* against the wishes of the other siddhars. "Purposely he [Agastya] concealed these important points on muppu because he was afraid that his colleagues or co-Siddhas would find fault with him or accuse him and get angry..."[36] Andiappa Pillai, in an article written in connection with the World Tamil Conference held in 1983, concurs. "The Siddhars are unanimous in concealing the details of manufacture of the magic drug Muppu. Even those Siddhars who loudly proclaim that they would narrate everything about Muppu ultimately do not say anything significant about it."[37]

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[35] *Nandhi [Nanti],* mālai 9, maṇi 7, May 1972, 13. Quoted in Hausman, 410.

[36] M. Shanmukavelu, *A Study of Siddha Vaidya Muppu* (Coimbatore: The Industrial Welfare Association, 1951), 46.

[37] Quoted in Hausman, 408.

The major difficulty in producing *muppu* seems to be confusion around a particular substance called "*pūnīṟu*." M. Shanmugavelu calls it "the first ingredient of muppu," and most all manuscripts on *muppu* mention it as a key ingredient.[38] In "Agastiyar Cūṭca Muppu 32," "Agastya's 32 Verses on Subtle Muppu," we find a description of *pūnīṟu*.

> Listen to the details of *pūnīṟu*. It sprouts above ground, and is very concentrated like lime. Don't touch it with your hand, as the hand will become blistered. (15)
>
> Gather it with a margosa leaf and put it in a container. Go only to the place called "Pōm." There the stuff called "ām" [probably *paripāṣai* for *pūnīṟu*] was graciously (*puṉitamāka*) available to us there on a full-moon night, hanging densely in clusters, like the love of Parvati hangs densely in clusters. Listen to the details of *pūnīṟu* which is called "pūm." Oh, pious guy, I will tell you this for your [immortal] survival! (16)
>
> If one asks what are the names that others have used for *pūnīṟu*: "*curuṅkāṉa ravipījam*" [the condensed seed of the sun], "*pūnākam,*" "*pūminātam,*" *civaṉuppu,*" "*veṇṇīr,*"...[gives ten more names] I only know these words, not the endless tens of millions of others. Oh, they have sung countless names! (17-18) [39]

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[38] Shanmukavelu, 35.

[39] "pūnīṟṟiṉ kuṟippaikkēḷu
cūḷappā pūmiyatu poṅkimēlē
cuṇṇāmpu pōlirukkuñ curukkāmmetta
āḷappā kaiyiṉāṟ ṟoṭṭiṭātē
appaṉē kaiyuṅ koppaḷamatāmē. (15)

tāmeṉṟa veppōlai taṉṉiṉālē
tānvārip pāttiratti liṭṭukkoṇṭu
pōmeṉṟa maṉaikkuttān ceṉṟē aṅku
pāraṇattait toḻutiṟaiñcip puṉitamāka
āmeṉṟa poruḷ namakkuk kiṭaittateṉṟu
āttāḷait toḻutiṟaiñci aṉpu koṇṭu
pūmeṉṟa pūnīṟṟiṉ viparaṅkēḷu
puṇṇiyaṉē nīpiḻaikkac colluvēṉē. (16)

colliyatōr pūnīṟṟiṉ peyarēteṉṉil
curuṅkāṉa ravipījameṉṟum pērām
alliyatōr pūnākam pūminātam
āṉatoru civaṉuppu veṇṇīreṉṟum... (17)

These are the only details that Agastya gives, going on to tell you dissolve this *pūnīṟu* in pure water, etc. The most specific reference is a place called "Pōm," a place with no clear geographic reference.

In his dictionary of the Tamil sciences, T.V. Sambasivam Pillai writes about *pūnīṟu*: "Efflorescence grows, in clusters and bursts out into flower at new moon or full moon nights during dew seasons... on the soil of fuller's earth. When the sun rises it turns to fine powder."[40] M. Shanmugavelu writes, "There is a peculiar and seasonal influence between the Earth and Moon for the formation of Puneer in certain selected areas fit for its growth. Puneer crops up ten days after New Moon (Amavaseii) or about the time of Paurnami (i.e., Full Moon). It crops up early in the morning and loses its life after sun-rise."[41] However, it is difficult for ordinary people to find puneer, and the author admits that "we invariably fail to secure first rate puneer..." Such high-quality puneer might only be acquired by "Yogis and Sadhus."[42] Shanmukavelu concludes, "I must frankly admit that the success of muppu depends largely upon what quality of puneer we get," a pessimistic estimation given the elusiveness of puneer.[43]

The conditions in which *pūnīṟu* might be acquired are numerous and ephemeral. The physical location is unclear, but it is clear that *pūnīṟu* will only grow in a particular type of soil. The time is very specific, just between dawn and sunrise. The appearance is

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...pēraṉantaṅkōṭi
ōrāmal yāṉaṟinta pērimmāttiram
ōkōkō pāṭiṉā raṉantam pērē. (18)

"Agastiyar Cūṭca Muppu 32," verses 15-18, 118-19.

[40] T. V. Sambasivam Pillai, *Tamil-English Dictionary*, 543.

[41] Shanmukavelu, 59.

[42] Ibid., 36.

[43] Ibid., 129.

of a somewhat extraordinary crystallization on the earth, but is not specified further. Furthermore, the number of different names given for *pūṉīṟu* in the pre-modern texts are almost infinite. The problem is both too little information and too much – if one searches the corpus of available manuscripts and catalogues the qualities of *pūṉīṟu* in all its names, the list would be extremely long and certainly contradictory. Here we find continuity between pre-modern and modern Tamil medical discourse, in that both posit the extraordinary just beyond the limits of knowledge and accessibility, whether in on ancient island called "Lemuria" or at a unknown place called "Pōm."

This recognition of the difficulty of producing *muppu*, and the lack of any clear exposition of its manufacture, does not prevent many *vaidyas* from attempting to formulate it. In his February 9, 1991 speech at a meeting of the Kerala Siddha Sangam, Dr. Edison speaks of the necessity of manufacturing *muppu* powder (*muppu cuṇṇam*), and announces: "I have planned a scheme for our preparing *muppu cuṇṇam* in our ashram. If everyone will share, we can prepare the *muppu cuṇṇam* required [for the proper practice of siddha medicine]."[44] The potential that *muppu* might be prepared, and the promise offered by its successful completion, overshadow the reality of failed attempts at production. Another siddha *vaidya*, Devasahayam, who runs a medical shop, states: "We have not prepared muppu. But we are not without the thought of doing preparation of muppu. Yes, we have made some attempts to prepare it... If there is muppu, it is said that people will be without even gray hair and wrinkles. There will be no gray hair and wrinkles. No cancer. Now the AIDS which is here, they say that if there is muppu, treatment can be given to all."[45]

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[44] Quoted in Hausman, 412.

[45] Quoted in ibid., 413.

While no one seems to know how to make *muppu*, everyone knows what it can do. The absence of *muppu* – the lack of a clear formula, and the concrete lack of a medicine which bestows immortality – is balanced by its overwhelming *presence* in references in siddha medical discourse, and by a clear sense of all that it will offer. These contemporary *vaidyas*' affirmations of *muppu*'s effectiveness continue a tradition evidenced by the manuscripts, which imbue *muppu* with great power: the body will become as hard as a diamond, camphor-scented, and golden in color.[46] One will become strong and beautiful, gray hair and wrinkles will vanish, and "the word '*eman̲*' [the god of death] will itself die."[47] One will have the power to chase away ghosts (*pēy*), evil spirits (*picācu*), and demons (*pūtam*), and bring all wealth under one's control.[48] More recently, as we have seen, *muppu* has been touted as the medicine to cure AIDS, cancer, asthma, and all other chronic illnesses that have proven impervious to biomedical cures.

While it is the extravagance of the claims for *muppu* that captures the imagination of siddha practitioners, it is the secrecy in which it is shrouded that enables them to hold out hope for its future manufacture. As A. Shanmuga Velan paraphrases Paracelsus, "No science can be deservedly held in contempt by one who knows nothing about it."[49] What is true for science is true for particular medicinal preparations. The fact that no one has ever seen *muppu*, and that no one has achieved the immortality it bestows, does not deter those who pronounce its position at the apex of the world's medical preparations, and thereby assert the preeminence of siddha medical knowledge of which *muppu* is the greatest "achievement." If the "presence" of *muppu* is to be found only in discourse,

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[46] "Akastiya Mun̲ivar Kar̲pa Muppu Kuru Nūl 100," verses 26, 29, 25-27.

[47] "Akastiya Mun̲ivar Kar̲pa Muppu Kuru Nūl 100," verse 54, 35.

[48] "Agastiyar Cūṭca Muppu 32," verse 27, 121-22.

[49] Velan, 105.

there is no contradiction between its physical absence and the fascination which many *vaidyas* display towards it, as it is what is offered to the imagination but never fully delivered which captivates most wholly.

What is the particular force of this juxtaposition between obscurity and clarity? Georg Simmel, speaking of the shielding of knowledge from others, points out the "contradiction that what recedes before the consciousness of the others and is hidden from them, is to be emphasized in their consciousness."[50] This is true as well, perhaps even more, for knowledge that is hidden from the *self*, as the most extraordinary knowledge promised in the manuscripts is hidden from those very people who claim this knowledge as their own. To speak of this as a "contradiction," however, is to leave it unexplained, and in fact I am arguing just the opposite: the relationship between the ephemerality of knowledge and its value is causal, not contrary. In his study of Bengali tantrism, Hugh Urban speaks of "advertising" secrecy, the "dialectic of lure and withdrawal," as one of the basic strategies of those who proclaim to hold secrets.[51] In this sense, knowledge that a few know, i.e., a secret, differs little from knowledge that no one knows, or that only the siddhars know. To the degree that this knowledge is advertised, through textual references and personal testimony, it appears to be true, while to the degree that it is obscured, it can be filled with the extraordinary possibilities of a space that falls outside scrutiny.

This juxtaposition of obscurity and clarity is reflected in the language of the manuscripts, which is extremely familiar and informal on the one hand, and enigmatic and abstruse on the other. K. Kailasapathy has pointed to this paradox in the broader literary writings attributed to the siddhars. As we have seen, the siddhars are considered

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[50] Simmel, 337.

[51] Urban, *The Economics of Ecstasy,* 101.

to be champions of the lower castes and thus embody an egalitarianism that was lacking in brahmanical religious practice. At the same time, their language and ideas are arcane, prompting Kailasapathy to note that "The poetry of the Siddhas is sustained by the simple colloquial expressions and speech patters of the common people. . . . And yet these poems are, to be sure, full of obscurities and peculiarities that baffle the best of literary minds."[52]

Likewise, the *paripāṣai* of the medical manuscripts is balanced by their literary style, which is informal and colloquial. For example, many of the verb forms are informal commands, (e.g., "kēḷ!" "listen!"), which, while certainly revealing the hierarchy of the siddhar/human and guru/student relationships (as the transmission of these texts imply both), also highlights a certain informality in this transmission. These commands are often followed by "appā," a "term of address used by elders or superiors to call youngsters."[53] It is a term commonly heard in ordinary speech. In more recent considerations of medical knowledge, siddha practitioners characterize their system as egalitarian, a medicine for the common people, in contrast to ayurveda and biomedicine, which they vilify as elitist and expensive, written in languages that most Tamils do not understand. At the same time, they admit their failure to successful decipher the *paripāṣai* of the siddhars. How can we understand this conjunction of accessibility and obscurity?

The effect of juxtaposing obscure and familiar language not only highlights the gap between them, but also makes the obscure seem knowable and the familiar seem mysterious. When the medical manuscripts say "listen, man, I'll tell you the formula for

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[52] K. Kailasapathy, "The Writings of the Tamil Siddhas," in *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*, ed. Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 394-95.

[53] *Kriyāvin̲ Tar̲kālat Tamil̲ Akarāti*, 29.

muppu," they use a register that the reader identifies as a highly informal level of social interaction, the almost jocular banter of family and friends. These idioms embody the plain-talking of ordinary life. When this most familiar language contains obscure formulae, the effect is to make the obscurity itself seem familiar and possible, rendering the indecipherable recognizable. The proximity of the familiar and the arcane makes the arcane seem less so. The opposite is also true, as the familiar is imbued with the value offered by the obscure. *Vaidyas* can declare that these texts, so clearly *ours* because they are in the language we use everyday, contain great mysteries. Understood in this context, the siddha texts tempt ordinary people with extraordinary medicine. Considering these Tamil texts against the other prevalent medical texts in pre-colonial Tamil Nadu, Sanskrit ayurvedic texts, non-brahman *vaidyas* and promoters of pure Tamil tradition have read the colloquial Tamil of the siddhars as a forceful and ancient expression of non-brahman vernacular community.

6.4 Conclusion

Georg Simmel remarks, "The secret offers, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world; and the latter is decisively influenced by the former."[54] For siddha *vaidyas* over the last several centuries, this "second world" is the world of secret medical knowledge, a world unavailable to non-medical people who possess no texts, and to *vaidyas* who possess the wrong texts. This second world, the internal world of the *paramparai*, is a world where immortality is possible, a place beyond history. The utopia of pre-historical Tamil society has its medical counterpart in the exclusive domain of the *paramparai*. These are ideal worlds that separate the members of tradition from those without, worlds that are grounded in the attempt to imagine a pure community.

[54] Simmel, 330.

T.M. Luhrmann points out that for magicians in contemporary England, "the differentiation between insider and outsider separates the magical from the mundane; this not only makes the magician feel special, but also shields his magic from conflict with scepticism."[55] Siddha *vaidyas*, their practice under attack as unscientific or forged, similarly delineate a sphere called unique tradition, conceived as individual *paramparais* or as a broader, ethnic Tamil community, within which the scrutiny of the outsider is rejected. By evoking a submerged continent, elusive siddhars, or secret knowledge, siddha practitioners protect the components of their knowledge from second party testing, a hallmark of the scientific method. One must know the ingredients of a medicine in order to produce it, and one must be able to produce it to prove it ineffective.

[55] Luhrmann, "The Magic of Secrecy," 139.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE LOSS OF TRADITION

While secrecy has been a central feature in the transmission of siddha medical knowledge for centuries, the *morality* of secrecy in South India has dramatically changed from the beginning of the twentieth century. Long ago, Nietzsche pointed out that values themselves have histories, and that therefore "we need a critique of moral values, the value of these values should itself, for once, be examined – and so we need to know about the conditions and circumstances under which the values grew up, developed and changed…"[1] In Tamil-speaking South India and in South Asia more generally, secrecy as a mode of disseminating knowledge has undergone a radical change in value, from a moral duty that keeps powerful knowledge in the hands of the good, to secrecy as jealous desire that has led to the disintegration of a unified Tamil community.

At a seminar held in 1983 at the International Institute of Tamil Studies in Madras, the keynote speaker R. Thyagarajan spoke not of the dangers of the open display of knowledge but of the disastrous effects of secrecy on the development of siddha medicine. "Reticence, secrecy and selfishness were the triple defects which stood in the way, this glorious system was not allowed to flourish, though it did not die out because of its innate strength based on truth."[2] Many *vaidyas* today reject secrecy on both moral and pragmatic grounds. In the following pages, I will document the historical trajectory of secrecy in siddha medicine, a history that is just one instance of broader debates in India

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 8.

[2] R. Thyagarajan,"Key Note Address," in *Heritage of the Tamils*, ed. S. V. Subramanian, vii.

about whether the proper locus of knowledge is in public or private spheres, in the archive or in the home.

This history raises a number of questions. First, as Nietzsche asks, what are the "conditions and circumstances under which the values" surrounding secrecy "grew up, developed and changed"? In other words, what marks the historical trajectory of the morality of secrecy in South India? Among the important questions these discourses raise for Indian society, one is particularly vital to medical practitioners: How do those who engage in traditional practices, often legitimated through strategies of secrecy, continue to assert the relevance of their knowledge? Or in more specific terms, given the contemporary proscription of secrecy, what, if not secrecy, currently serves to validate the extraordinary claims still voiced on behalf of siddha medicine? I will argue that the function of secrecy as a strategy for prestige is now served by another form of concealed knowledge, that is, Tamil medical knowledge that has been *lost* in the ravages of time. Again, we will find that the ends of knowledge mark the beginnings of the extraordinary claims for siddha medicine.

7.1 Critiques of Secrecy

There have been a number of historical interventions that have enabled this historical shift in the value of secrecy. That these interventions have taken the form of critiques is not surprising; after all, it is critique more than sanction which is the transforming force of history. The first that I will examine, initially voiced by colonial administrators and biomedical doctors and later echoed by *vaidyas*, is a moral critique that secrecy provides an inscrutable space in which charlatans can operate with impunity, out of the public eye and so out of public domains of control and discipline. Another critique is both pragmatic and moral. It is primarily pragmatic when voiced by those whose loyalties lay outside of indigenous medical traditions. Government administrators

and biomedical doctors have held that secrecy is an impediment to the accumulation of effective medical knowledge and techniques, arguing that it is the public display of knowledge, best embodied in biomedical practice, that is the most efficient way to advance medicine.

This same critique has been taken up from the inside, so to speak, by those who have sought to defend rather than discount traditional practices. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, the changes to Tamil tradition wrought by colonialism were not simply forced upon Tamils as passive actors, but were chosen by them in response to changing circumstances. Or, paraphrasing Levinas' ahistorical, phenomenological formulation, from the viewpoint of the self, one's tradition is less situated in the objective, foreign, or other world, than that external world is itself situated in relation to tradition.[3] Many *vaidyas* have argued for the moral and pragmatic failings of secrecy. Often involved in formulations of Tamil revivalism as well as in government projects to centralize and control indigenous medical practices, these medical leaders have attempted to articulate a unified siddha medical *system*. They reject secrecy as immoral, as selfishly dividing a naturally coherent Tamil medical community. At the same time, these *vaidyas* do not generally reject that conduit of secrecy, the hereditary lineage, arguing that hereditary education provides an experience common to *vaidyas* that distinguishes them from their biomedical adversaries and unites them as a community.

Secrecy was a particularly pernicious practice in the eyes of the imperial government as it defined arenas that were less open to British control. The critiques that were raised by medical scientists and colonial administrators, and that are today raised by those who are part of the centralizing project of the state and national governments, view

[3] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 153.

secrecy as providing a refuge for dishonest posers to medical knowledge beyond public means of evaluation and control. Because of traditional modes of hereditary education,

> Examination, certification and licensing were not in vogue. This enabled many a self-styled doctor with meagre knowledge and qualification to indulge in medical practice, and much worse than that, to pass on his whims and fancies as the wisdom of ancient matters. With no way to prove or disprove that claim, such spurious knowledge too gained wide currency, eclipsing the wisdom of the original seers.[4]

In 1957, Dr. A. Srinivasalu Naidu, an M.D. and also retired dean of the College of Integrated Medicine, writes of the "guru" method of medical education.

> In days of yore, medical education was imparted by unitary teachers, "Gurus" in "Gurukulas," in indifferent schools, subject to whims, fancies, and patronage of teachers often earned by pupils under tutelage and personal service to the teachers and his family and uncontrolled by a standard authority. Sometimes, teachers of indifferent merit masqueraded as scholars to the detriment of pupils.[5]

For these medical leaders, secrecy is not only detrimental to the effective development of medical knowledge, but it also fails to provide *moral* control over medical practice. Private knowledge provides a concealed space for quacks to operate outside of public scrutiny. While the manuscripts similarly warned of false *vaidyas*, they did not raise a critique of secrecy *per se* – indeed, the proliferation of charlatans was itself articulated as a primary reason to exercise control in the transmission of powerful knowledge that, in the hands of the immoral, would be used for pernicious ends.

The view that values public knowledge over esoteric knowledge is for many one of the cornerstones of the modern sciences.[6] This perception holds for many in India. In

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[4] Krishnan, 58.

[5] A. Srinivasalu Naidu, "Medical Education and Medical Relief," in *The Government College of Integrated Medicine Decennial Souvenir*, 43.

[6] I do not mean to imply that there is no secrecy in science, nor is the practice of science an entirely demystified discipline. But I do agree with David Himrod on the question of whether science is characterized by secrecy or openness. Himrod, in an article detailing some modes of secrecy in science, admits that "it would seem, on the whole, that the stronger position is that which states that science is non-

describing biomedical methods, S. Alagappan, a member of the governing body of the general course in Indian medicine, writes:

> Since our [biomedical] knowledge has been acquired by rational and not secret method we are open to criticism and thereby correction of our knowledge. Few people realise that knowledge is one commodity that increases in its quantity and improves its quality, by being given to others. Another feature of modern medicine is that it lends itself to team work of various types. . . . Such being the nature and extent of modern rational allopathic system of medicine, it would be a misnomer to style other methods, such as Ayurvedic, Homeopathic, etc., as systems of Medicine. But unfortunately, exaggeration and self-glorification are our national trait, irrespective of results attained thereby."[7]

Alagappan's view of knowledge as a commodity, a possession to be shared or kept secret, is a sentiment that Tamil *vaidyas* of hereditary training also hold. However, his plea for the open sharing of knowledge goes against centuries of medical practice in South Asia according to which it is only secret knowledge that is rare, unique, and therefore valuable.

One effect of secrecy within lineages has been that Tamil *vaidyas* developed a variety of different medicines and techniques to treat a single illness. Kumaresan, a siddha practitioner in the Kanya Kumari district of southern Tamil Nadu, was trained in traditional fashion by his father and also studied at a siddha medical college. He traces the variety of medical techniques among Tamil *vaidyas* to the different redactions of knowledge that originated with the various siddhars.

> Siddha medical system was not written by one sage. It was written by many siddhars, the 18 siddhars... Since each siddhar has written separately in his own way, the government could not compile them together into one scheme.... For fever, one siddhar would have said one medicine, Agasthiar would have said another medicine, Pāmpāṭṭi siddha would have

mysterious and public." David K. Himrod, "Secrecy in Modern Science," in *Secrecy in Religions*, ed. Kees W. Bolle, Studies in the History of Religions 49, ed. M. Heerma Van Voss and R. J. Z. Werblowsky (New York: E. J. Brill, 1987), 103.

[7] S. Alagappan, "Medical Education," in *The Government College of Integrated Medicine Decennial Souvenir*, 38.

> mentioned another medicine.... So here it is not one medicine for the same disease, as in allopathy.[8]

For Kumaresan, this lack of systematization of medical knowledge is not cause for alarm, and does not reduce the effectiveness of medical practice.

In the twentieth century, however, a growing number of *vaidyas* have endeavored to modernize traditional medicine. These have served as the faculty and directors of schools and hospitals of traditional medicine modeled on colonial institutions established by the British. This group, not those educated by hereditary means, have increasingly set the agenda for the development of traditional medicine and have been especially influential in influencing government policy towards and funding of traditional medical practices. Their objective has been to gather and systematize medical knowledge, a goal that is radically opposed to the proliferation of knowledge in hereditary lineages.

> "The individualized master-pupil system of learning by rote and apprenticeship, and the preservation of knowledge in palmleaf-manuscripts over a few millennia had resulted in a great proliferation of independent practitioners of varied capabilities and honesty and a bewildering variety of prescriptions – effective, ineffective, mixed, shotgun, ritual, magical, etc. Medical schools and organized teaching were unknown. The medical knowledge lay scattered in myriads of palmleaf-manuscripts worshipped as heirlooms in professional as well as lay households. Comprehensive textbooks dealing methodically with pathogenesis, diagnosis, prognosis and treatment of diseased states in classified completeness were lacking. Most of the palmleaf-manuscripts were fragmentary and sectional. . . .[9]

This view of Tamil medical knowledge as "scattered" must be properly historicized. As we have seen, Tamil medical manuscripts did not speak of the different siddhars having a variety of medical techniques, but distinguished them according to their willingness to reveal their knowledge. According to the logic of the texts, differences that would arise between *paramparais* were not of the nature of a plethora of true formulae, but reflected

[8] Quoted in Hausman, 387-88.

[9] Krishnan, 57-58.

competition in seeking the singular truth which all the siddhars knew but which they transmitted differently.

Secrecy did not diminish or divide true knowledge, then, but kept it safe. To those who seek to systematize siddha knowledge, however, the variety of medical formulae no longer signals the *competition* over a singular truth but rather the *dispersal* of truth. This suggests a project that *vaidyas* have increasingly set for themselves, to gather together these partial truths in order to (re)unify a medical *system*. While a hereditary *vaidya* might argue that his *paramparai* has deciphered the true knowledge of the siddhars, in contemporary discourse of this systematizing type, all knowledge that is not shared is thereby partial and will not attain its full value until it is joined with the rest of its dispersed epistemic brethren. What emerges is a critique of secrecy as an impediment to truth, a pragmatic rather than a moral critique, based on the conviction that the public sharing of knowledge is the best way to improve effectiveness.[10]

While the obscurity of *paripāṣai* provides siddha *vaidyas* with the fantasy of extraordinary power, it is simply a frustrating and irrational aspect of traditional medicine to those who seek to unify disparate practices into a single system.

> It is contended by the followers of Siddha and Ayurveda systems of Medicine, that the textual matter or words are to be explained or annotated according to their context and the erudition of the scholar and no fixed value can ever be placed on a passage, unlike the very definite and unchangeable meaning of scientific or medical words or terms or passages. Such inconstancy of word meanings is unscientific and highly misleading. I had attended a meeting on "Muppu" (what exactly Muppu is no one knows) and about a dozen scholars spoke, arriving at no finality of the substance, one contending it to be derived from human urine, another from rock-salt, a third from submarine crystals on rocks, a fourth as common-salt and so ad galore. The personal factor of textual interpretation has first

[10] The critique of esoteric education in India is not new. However, it generally has been elaborated in terms of the monopolization of knowledge by particular groups, rather than based on a general, formal principle that the public development of knowledge is superior.

> to be remedied for the universal acceptance of the textual matter of Ayurveda or Siddha.[11]

From the viewpoint of science, this "unscientific" inconstancy of word meanings is a matter perhaps for religion, but never for science, and therefore obscurity must be removed to make knowledge properly scientific. In such a view, the polysemy of *paripāṣai* does not fill these words with extraordinary potential but empties them of all value. The inroads made by such models of public science into Indian education and among the medical elite have led many to argue that the opening of esoteric knowledge to scrutiny is the only way to save indigenous medicine from irrelevance.

> While the world is tending to have one authorised system of medicine, India with its ancient Siddha and Ayurveda systems of medicine (along with modern medicine) has yet to standardise the former systems and throw them open for the world to study them. . . The surest way of killing Indigenous Medicine is isolation, parallelism, emotionalism, passion and vituperation. Co-operation is the best goal of survival.[12]

In addition to these negative evaluations of secrecy on pragmatic grounds, there is a further *moral* critique of secrecy as motivated by selfishness. For those who raise this critique, secrecy is a sign of individual desires that oppose the harmony of a previously and inherently unified system. It leads to divisions among siddha practitioners and so it also generates division within the Tamil community. The justification for this attempt to systematic Tamil medical knowledge has been a *recognition* of the coherence of this medical knowledge. I do not mean "recognition" in its passive sense as the observation of something real, but in its active, usually diplomatic sense of *affirmation* (e.g., the recognition of statehood), of a *re-cognition* which is nonetheless a first articulation. This recognition of internal unity has been concomitant with shifting notions of difference, where the primary others were no longer *vaidyas* practicing under the auspices of

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[11] Naidu, 45.

[12] Naidu, 43.

different *paramparais*, but allopathic doctors working under a radically different medical framework, and ayurvedic practitioners who had suddenly come to represent *the* traditional Indian doctor. With the possibility that their practices might be subsumed by ayurveda or eclipsed by biomedicine, Tamil *vaidyas* today generally consider themselves to be part of a single system, even if they do not in practice share their secrets with the rest of their new-found community.

K. Pārttacārati, a registered Indian medical practitioner (R.I.M.P.), laments the lack of unity among siddha practitioners. "When I repeatedly proclaim the need for unity among siddha *vaidyas*, this [proclamation] creates great distress. Why this pathetic state?...All siddha doctors do their service, uniformly following the methods instituted by the siddhars. This being the case, why is there not even a modicum of unity?"[13] He goes on to lament the plethora of rival siddha medical associations that have been formed, urging unity among *vaidyas*. "Siddha *vaidyas* must not give room for the accusations that slander is rife among them, and that they live hiding their valuable medical techniques from one another. When siddha *vaidyas* think how much mutual concern and solidarity will develop if they share those truths that they know with one another, then integration [into a single system] will flourish!"[14] The secrets between *paramparais* are now a cause

[13] "Citta vaittiyarkaḷukkuḷ orumaippāṭu tēvaiyeṉa aṭikkaṭi nām paṟai cāṟṟikkoṇṭiruppatu mikunta vētaṉaiyaittāṉ uṇṭākkukiṟatu. ēṉ inta aval nilai? ... cittarkaḷ vakuttut tanta citta neṟiyai ellā citta maruttuvarkaḷum orumikka kaṭaipiṭittu cēvai ceykiṟōm. avvāṟirukka, ēṉ inta orumaippāṭu māttiram illai?" K. Pārttacārati, "Kaṭṭiḻanta Citta Maruttuvarkaḷ Orumaippāṭu" ["The Unification of Siddha Doctors Who Have Lost Their Ties (To One Another)"], in *Citta Maruttuva Nūl Ārāycci Nilaiyam Mupperum Viḻā Malar* [Souvenir of the Conference of the Siddha Medical Literature Research Centre] (Chennai: Siddha Medical Research Centre, 1983), 26.

[14] "ciṟanta maruntu ceymuṟaikaḷai oruvarukkoruvar maṟaittu vāḻkiṟārkaḷ eṉkiṟa paḻiccol citta maruttuvarkaḷiṭaiyē paravalāka uḷatu eṉkiṟakuṟṟaccāṭṭukku iṭam koṭukkāmal oruvarukkoruvar tāṅkaḷ aṟinta uṇmaikaḷai taṅkaḷukkuḷ parimāṟik koḷvatiṉāl evvaḷavu paraspara aṉpum oṟṟumaiyum ēṟpaṭa vaḻiceyyum eṉṟu niṉaittup pārkka orumaippāṭu viḷaṅkum." K. Pārttacārati, "Kaṭṭiḻanta Citta Maruttuvarkaḷ Orumaippāṭu" ["The Unification of Siddha Doctors Who Have Lost Their Ties (To One Another)"], in *Citta Maruttuva Nūl Ārāycci Nilaiyam Mupperum Viḻā Malar*, 27.

for shame, as another *vaidya* compares his colleagues who keep their texts secret to dogs who will not share a coconut.[15]

The equation of secrecy with selfishness was not only made in the last century – as we have seen in the palm-leaf manuscripts, other siddhars were generally viewed as selfish in hiding knowledge, even as this selfishness signaled the value of their medicines. At the same time, these pre-modern texts implored the *vaidyas* who have inherited them to keep their contents secret from those outside the *paramparai*. In the manuscripts, the exclusive possession of a unique, effective medicine does not indicate an attitude of selfish accumulation but signals both medical and moral superiority, as powerful knowledge would only be revealed and understood by good people. Secrecy was viewed as both a moral and pragmatic strategy, conferring value to the effective potential of the medicine and attesting to the moral character of the *vaidya*. As with the esoteric language these texts contain, secrecy itself embodied a range of meanings and values.

What is new in these modern critiques of secrecy, then, is not the equation of secrecy with selfishness but the terms of this equation, as the communities of knowledge that are deprived by secrecy are no longer individual, competing lineages but the cooperative Tamil community. Secrecy among *vaidyas* is now a detrimental force, splitting apart a community whose natural state is that of unity. In an article called "The Needs of Siddha Medicine," Ci. Meykaṇṭār suggests that siddha medicine began to decline in the eighteenth century, citing the major cause, aside from British imperialism, to be its secret, hereditary character. The remedies for this decay, he suggests, all originate with government action, such as setting up a central research committee on siddha medicine, locating all siddha manuscripts and books in one library in Tamil Nadu, and publicizing this knowledge in other Tamil sources.[16] A similar sentiment is voiced

[15] P. Muttukkaruppa Piḷḷai, 37.

[16] C. Meykaṇṭar, 44-47.

fifteen years later by Dr. Ka. Cu. Uttamarāyaṉ, retired director of the department of Indian medicine.

> A few Tamil doctors are prescribing good medicines for a few specific diseases. They don't give these medicines to others; nor do they teach others the method to prepare these medicines. They have created these [medicines] as their family wealth (cottu) and have been using them for generations (*paramparai paramparai*yāka). They need to reveal these medicines to many others. Otherwise, in order to obtain these [medicines], the government should give them adequate funds.[17]

This appeal that the *government* acquire this hereditary wealth signals a shift in what many *vaidyas* consider to be the proper location of siddha medical knowledge, from the hereditary lineage to the public sphere, a public sphere limited by the boundaries of a specifically Tamil community. The proponents of more centralized educational models urge practitioners to sacrifice their individual goals for the good of the greater community, a community of knowledge now defined in ethnic and linguistic terms.

In the twentieth century, traditional medical practice in Tamil Nadu, as I have demonstrated in prior chapters, became part of a politics of identity that demarcated the "proper" divisions of community and knowledge as Tamil, Aryan/Sanskrit, and Western. Those practicing medicine based on texts attributed to the siddhars saw themselves occupying a unified medical space called "siddha medicine" or "Tamil medicine," which was itself an essential component of a coherent Tamil tradition. Increasingly, siddha *vaidyas* began to see the *real* divisions of knowledge and practice as lying between a siddha medicine *system*, on the one hand, and ayurveda, unani, and biomedicine on the

[17] "cila tamiḻ maruttuvarkaḷ cuṟippiṭṭa cila nōykaḷukku nalla maruntukaḷai koṭuttu varukiṟārkaḷ. ammaruntukaḷai maṟṟavarkaḷukkut taruvatum illai; maruntu ceymuṟaiyum kaṟṟut taruvatumillai; atu avarkaḷuṭaiya cuṭumpac cottāka ākkik koṇṭu *paramparai paramparai*yākak kaiyāṇṭu varukiṉṟaṉar. immaruntukaḷai palarum aṟiyum vaṇṇam ceyya vēṇṭum. illaiyāl aracu avarkaḷukku pōtiya māṉiyam aḷittāvatu peṟṟuttara vēṇṭum." Ka. Cu. Uttamarāyaṉ, "Tamiḻ Maruttuvam Uyvaṭaiya Vaḻimuṟai" ["Ways to Save Tamil Medicine"], in *Citta Maruttuva Nūl Ārāycci Nilaiyam Mupperum Viḻā Malar*, 18.

other.[18] Stepping back to view the effects of these changes on the *vaidya* as a historical subject, it becomes clear that shifting notions of community identity mark not only changes in the way autonomous, stable individuals view their practices, but indeed these notions have transformed the very way *vaidyas* view themselves. New articulations of Tamil tradition mark a transformation of the individual medical practitioner from simply *vaidya* to *siddha vaidya* (*citta vaittiyar*), to *Tamil vaidya* (*tamiḻ vaittiyar*), and to *traditional vaidya* (*pāramparyamāṉa vaittiyar*).

When siddha *vaidyas* argue for the development of siddha along its own lines and close ranks in order to protect the "purity" of their knowledge, they assume a natural coherence of practices that have been splintered for as long as we know. The hope of the recovery of an "original" unity is one of the quintessential features that sets traditional medicine in modern India apart from prior conceptualizations. With the unification and systematization of siddha medical knowledge, they claim, the full potential of siddha practice will be realized and siddha medicine will (re)gain its place at the pinnacle of the medical world. The damage wrought by secrecy is not permanent, most contend, as the scattering of siddha medicine has not reduced the value of each of its pieces. "The rare truths of Tamil medicine are like precious hoardings in the minds of many siddha practitioners. Now is the time to join these as one so that they will increase."[19]

The effect of the opening up of siddha medical knowledge is encapsulated in the hope that *muppu* itself might be within the grasp of the unified Tamil community. "A systematic approach to these Kalpa plants as described in ancient Siddha medical works

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[18] In this way, the attempt to unify disparate practices into a single "system" resembles the attempts in the last 150 years to articulate a religion called Hinduism, a project of which the most recent manifestation is the Hindu nationalist attempt to perpetuation the notion of Hindutva. These medical and religious attempts at unification also share a focus on "foreign" others who define the boundaries of tradition.

[19] "tamiḻ maruttuvattiṉ ariya uṇmaikaḷ cittavaittiyarkaḷ palar maṉaṅkaḷilum cēmapporuḷāka irukkiṉṟaṉa. avaikaḷai oṉṟu cērttu vaḷaraviṭuvataṟkāṉa camayam ituvē." Eṉ. Cuppiramaṇiyam, 51.

may answer the problems of cancer, cardiovascular and other degenerated [sic] diseases, if not for rejuvenating the entire system."[20] After commenting that each *vaidya* has a few "rare medicines" that he secretly conceals, M. Shanmukavela appeals to *vaidyas* to "exchange ideas," following which "a day may come, not far off, for any one of the Siddha physicians to achieve successful preparations of not only '*vaidya* muppu' but also its allied compounds and various other rare specific medicines even for diseases which have no substantial cure discovered yet."[21] The promise for siddha *vaidyas* is not only the selfless healing of the people of the world, but the winning of fame and fortune. "If this *vaidya*-muppu is successfully achieved, it is needless to point out that the standard of Siddha system of medicine in particular will reach a very high pitch and the whole world will look to you for guidance and appreciate."[22] The open dispersal of siddha medical knowledge in the global medical market will bring siddha *vaidyas* and Tamil civilization world-wide renown.

7.2 In Defense of the Guru

In the early decades of the twentieth century, siddha practitioners were already lamenting the loss of hereditary modes of education with the ascendance of British-style education and institutions. In response to a government investigation into indigenous medical systems of the Madras state, carried out in 1919, V. Ponnuswami Pillai of Kumbakonam writes,

> In the area of medical practice, those who follow native medical methods have particular faith in experience compared to their own scientific research, and in hereditary medicine over formal educational institutions.

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[20] Velan, 143.

[21] Shanmukavelu, 3-4. "Vaidya muppu" is muppu specifically targeted for healing ailments as opposed to muppu used for alchemical processes, such as transforming mercury into gold.

[22] Ibid., 5-6.

> Therefore, medical reform in this country won't happen through school education as it does in the Western countries. . . . Those who skillfully practice medicine on the basis of traditional experience (*pāramparyamāṉa aṉupavam*) are no longer influential in the profession because of the singular prestige gained through modern medical institutions.[23]

This author is certainly correct that the traditional system of education in India is under attack and has lost much ground. On the other hand, the same author might have been surprised to know that the hereditary style of education continues into the twenty-first century. Why did the critiques, outlined above, not lead to the eradication of hereditary methods? Why does hereditary education remain, in Bruce Lincoln's words, an "ideological warrant" for siddha medicine and Tamil tradition, a specific criterion that *vaidyas* invoke in their bid for authority?[24]

The siddha medical tradition is a modern tradition, not in the way that Tamil *vaidyas* argue – as an ancient tradition that nevertheless has always embodied contemporary scientific ideals and techniques – but insofar as it is a formulation of a community of knowledge and practice that has maintained its vitality in the face of those who say its time is past. Tradition defends the ancient from the demands of the modern, even as its rhetoric transforms the ancient into the modern. Yet this is not to say that the siddha tradition is only modern, nor that its pretension to represent the ancient is only pretension. Indeed, as a space over which Tamils successfully authorize pre-colonial practices, this tradition is something that is not only new, not only a contemporary space in which history is organized, but is itself organized by the history that precedes it, a

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[23] Cudēca vaittiyamuṟaikaḷaik kaiyāḷvōr taṅkaḷuṭaiya cāstirīya ārāycciyai viṭa aṉupavattilum, vaittiyappayiṟcikkāka kalvistāpaṉaṅkaḷai viṭa kuru ciśyamuṟaikaḷilum, vicēśa nampikkai vaikkiṉṟārkaḷākaiyāl, mēṉāṭukaḷaippōl paḷḷikkūṭap paṭippaikkoṇṭu vaittiya apiviruttiyai ittēcattil ceyyamuṭiyāmal pōyviṭṭatu. . . . pāramparyamāṉa aṉupavattai oṭṭi tiṟamaiyāka vaittiyam ceytuvantavarkaḷum navīṉa vaittiyastāpaṉaṅkaḷ mūlamāy ōr kavuravam peṟuvatum, celvākkuṭaṉ toḷil naṭattuvatum muṭiyāmal pōyviṭṭatu." *The Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine, Part 2*, 363.

[24] Lincoln, *Authority*, 117.

history that is not only colonial. In Sheldon Pollock's words, the present produces the past, but the past also produces the present, or in Marx's less optimistic formulation, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past."[25]

The transformations that have occurred in medical practice and discourse in Tamil Nadu have not taken shape wholly in line with, or entirely antithetical to, colonial and nationalist challenges. Even under the imperial British, *vaidyas* were the agents of their self-formation and of their delineations Tamil tradition. In responding to the critiques raised above, whether by those sympathetic or not to the continued health of traditional medical practice, *vaidyas* have not simply and unreflectively rejected the guru/student method of education. Many have argued against the view that the primary effect of hereditary education is to divide. They have emphasized instead characteristics that are held in common across lineages, qualities which distinguish a siddha medical tradition from that of biomedicine, a distinction that is invoked to shield this newfound tradition from the very critiques that helped to shape it.

In arguing for the validity of their medical practice, siddha practitioners often cite the ineffable *experience* of hereditary training as qualitatively different from the book learning gained through following a school curriculum. Hereditary experience here is not only that of the individual or even of the *paramparai*, but that which all hereditary *vaidyas* share, that which links them, if not in a collective community of knowledge, at least in a collective community of experience.

> Education itself was taken in its original sense as involving the educing of the latest capabilities and potentialities...and not as a mere mechanical process, operating on the basis of collective drill and training, as it is being

[25] Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 595.

> done at the present day in the system of modern education. Mechanism is fatal to learning and spirituality where the mind and soul should be left free. . . . The process of individual growth (inner) can only be achieved by means of a constant and close relationship between the pupil and the teacher.[26]

While the details transmitted by different gurus may vary, Madhavan emphasizes the similarities in the experience of the guru/student relationship. This emphasis on *form* over content, and indeed the imagining of hereditary teaching as a distinct form of teaching among many possibilities, could only be thought with the entry into South India of a radical different educational form, the "modern education" to which it is here, not coincidentally, juxtaposed.

Such "mechanism" of modern education is generally attributed to its dependence on "book learning." The impersonal nature of Western medical knowledge is contrasted to the oral nature of siddha knowledge.

> A medical person can only know the methods of siddha medicine after sitting with a good guru and watching that guru prepare great, unique medicines, even though those methods have been described at length in books. Only then will *ceypākam* [medical knowledge] and *kaipākam* [skill of hand in compounding medicines] be truly clear. In other medical systems, one can simply read and understand books to make medicines.[27]

Vaidyas predicate their unique tradition not only on the distinct content of their knowledge, but also on the uniqueness of the inherent *nature* of this knowledge. Consistent with their depiction of siddha medical knowledge as intuitive, seeing beyond the physicality of things, *vaidyas* hold that it can only be learned through a mode of transmission that transcends the materiality and impersonal nature of written texts. Writing in their view is at best reproduction, or transmission, of a more primary and

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[26] Madhavan, "Medical Education of the Tamils," 227-28.

[27] "cittamuṟaikaḷ, evvaḷavu virivāka nūlkaḷil vivarikkappaṭṭālum, ciṟappāṉa periya maruntukaḷai oru nalla kuruviṉiṭamiruntu, antak kuru ceyvataip pārttut tāṉ, oru maruttuvaṉ naṉṟākat terintukoḷḷa muṭiyum. ceypākam kaipākam appoḷutu tāṉ nalla muṟaiyil teḷivupaṭum. āṉāl maṟṟa muṟaikaḷil puttakaṅkaḷaip paṭittē terintukoṇṭu maruntukaḷ ceyyalām." Kastūri.

direct teaching, and needs to be supplemented by the words of a guru in order to be understood properly. One must experience this relationship to learn the secrets that the texts offer, and this experience is only available through the processes of tradition.

Speaking of the songs which the secret order of the Gallic Druids were expected to memorize, Simmel writes,

> The individual's dependence upon personal instruction, and the fact that the exclusive source of the teaching was within the secret order – not deposited in any objective piece of writing – these facts tied every single member with incomparable closeness to the group.[28]

Orality fosters this closeness because it demands a social relationship, something which is not compelled in the act of writing.[29] While texts are implicated in social relations, they are only secondarily so as the act of writing is an individual act. Furthermore, while written texts can be monitored and controlled, oral teachings might be concealed. The privacy of hereditary teaching invites the specific state critique of traditional practice as providing space for quackery, because it offers an arena in which traditional *vaidyas* can operate outside of "official" state control.

It is "experience" (*anupavam*) itself which siddha *vaidyas* evoke as a primary criterion for the authority of their practice. In its use in these contexts, *anupavam* shares with the English "experience" those qualities which Raymond Williams finds expressed in theological "witness," where "such experiences are offered not only as truths, but as the most authentic kind of truths."[30] Joan Scott similarly points to (and challenges) the contemporary authority of experience as a mode of acquiring non-discursive truth.[31] On

[28] Simmel, 350-51.

[29] Shils, 89.

[30] Williams, 128.

[31] Joan W. Scott, "Experience," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 25-26.

the other hand, in their critiques of traditional medical practices, colonial and biomedical authorities have depicted the "experience" of *vaidyas* as that of experimentation and empiricism. In their usage, "experience" retains its connection, common until the 18th century, with "experiment" and "empiricism." Williams points to the derogatory 17th century medical usage of "empericks" as charlatans and quacks,[32] a use which is reflected in Dr. Koman's description of "the science of Hindu medicine" as "sunk in a state of empirical obscurity."[33] Experience in this sense, as those who responded to Dr. Koman's report point out, "is a matter of accidence which the learned doctor was kind enough to say as 'empirical'."[34]

Thus, Mr. Ponnuswami Pillai of Kumbakonam acknowledges and counters the critique of the *vaidyas*' experience, asserting the incommensurability of experience.

> It is entirely offensive to think lowly of the experiential knowledge of indigenous medicine, saying that it would not stand up to modern research. How can one say for certain that only those doctrines of medical science that are useful for modern research are conclusive? Don't many doctrines change according to the opinions of distinguished researchers? So, to emphasize that indigenous medical knowledge can only be accepted after it is tested by modern research is unjust.[35]

After all, how can another deny that we have experiences? Furthermore, how can that other know what our experiences are? The radical interiority of experience, whether it is

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[32] Williams, 115.

[33] *Report of the Special Committee Appointed by the Joint Board of the Dravida Vaidya Mandal and The Madras Ayurveda Sabha in Reply to The Report on the Investigation into the Indigenous Drugs*, 20.

[34] Ibid., 95.

[35] "navīṉa ārāyccikkumuṉ niṟkavillai eṉṟ oru kāraṇattaic colli cutēca muṟaikaḷiluḷḷa cila aṉupava cittāntaṅkaḷaipaṟṟi tāḻmaiyāka niṉaippatu muṟṟilum aḻakalla. ēṉeṉil navīna ārāycciyiṉ payaṉāka vaittiya cāstirattil cittāntappaṭuttiyuḷḷa caṅkētaṅkaḷtāṉ muṭivāṉavai eṉṟu eppaṭi niccayamāka kūṟamuṭiyum. ataṉiṭattiluḷḷa cittāntaṅkaḷ palavum pirattiyēkamāṉa ārāyccikkārarkaḷiṉ apippirāyattai oṭṭi māṟupaṭṭu viṭukiṟatillaiyā? ākavē cutēca muṟaikaḷiluḷḷa vaittiya koḷkaikaḷ ellām navīna ārāyccikkumuṉ parīkśai ceyyappaṭṭa piṟakutāṉ oppukkoḷḷappaṭavēṇṭum eṉpatu ataiyē vaṟpuṟuttippēcuvatum niyāyamalla." *The Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine, Part 2*, 359.

individual, between a guru and student, or unique to a particular community, makes it "ours," while the radical uniqueness of experience shields it from critique, providing a space whose authority appears self-evident.

This interiority of experience celebrated by these *vaidyas* is not that of the individual as such. After all, it the authority of individual and original experience that is one of the cornerstones of a science of innovation, an authority which would contradict the notion that medicinal knowledge is to be *preserved*, not invented. Rather, the authoritative experience of siddha *vaidyas* is that which unifies individuals on the basis of "common experience" into a community of tradition. The distinctiveness of this common experience is the basis for the marking of community boundaries, as *vaidyas* assert that the experience of hereditary education is one that biomedical doctors do not share, opening up a radical distance between siddha methods and the techniques, culture, and critiques of biomedicine. It is this relativity and inscrutability of the common experience of tradition which makes it a realm of activity, a site, from which external critique can be addressed and extraordinary claims might appear feasible.

This emphasis on the shared experience of hereditary education, and its necessity in comprehending the secrets of an ancient system, not only serves to shield hereditary training from critique, but it also locates the "decay" of this system in non-traditional sources, scapegoating new methods of education that were institutionalized in colonial India. The siddhars had

> practised and preached this great system and left a mass of literature in Tamil on Palmyra leaves. As the subject treated is a highly technical one with its own special meanings for the words employed, they came to be misunderstood, when the personal instruction and guidance of the Guru to the disciple was lost.[36]

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[36] Velan, preface.

It is the loss of hereditary education under a guru that has led to the loss of precise and complete knowledge of the siddha medical system.

While *vaidyas* blame "foreign" imperial governments, whether British or Aryan, for the destruction of siddha medical secrets, they likewise appeal to the sympathy of contemporary state and national governments to rescue these secrets. Pleas were even made to the colonial British to support traditional education. In the 1923 *Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine*, N. Veeraraghavaperumal Pillai urges novices to study under a "Tamil medical guru," assuring that they will become medical experts. "If these government officials support guruhood (*guruttuvam*) in the name of Tamil medicine, without thinking too much or too little about their own objectives, there will be no obstacle to us, as Tamil doctors, attaining a praiseworthy position equal to that of Western doctors in some areas. If government officials attend to this matter, it is not due to partiality but justice."[37] This call for government support is a call to bring hereditary education into the public realm that has increasingly defined the valid locus of medical knowledge.

7.3 The Authority of Concealed Knowledge

Given the call for the public and open display of all siddha medical knowledge, one might expect that the highest value that secrecy confers on medical knowledge, that of the extraordinary, could no longer be maintained. This is not the case, however, as many Tamil *vaidyas* continue to claim the miraculous potential of their medicine, a potential which includes cures for cancer and AIDS and even offers the possibility of bodily immortality. Indeed, secrecy is not the only mode of obfuscation and

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[37] "irājāṅkattār iṣṭattuṭan̲ tamil̲ vaittiyattin̲pēril kuruttuvam vaittu tāṅkaḷē ceyyum lakṣiyam kuṟaiven̲ṟum atikamen̲ṟum eṇṇāmalpeṟṟu nan̲ṟipārāṭṭuvatōṭu ciṟcila viṣayaṅkaḷil mēl nāṭṭu vaittiyāḷaip pōllavē tamil̲ vaittiyān̲ākiya nāṅkaḷum camamākat taṭaiyirātu. rājāṅkattār ituviṣayattil kavan̲ippatān̲āl pakṣapātamillai, itu nīti tān̲." *The Report of the Committee on the Indigenous Systems of Medicine, Part 2*, 371.

mystification, and *vaidyas* have shifted the ground on which they make their claims, from knowledge that a *few* know, i.e., secrecy, to knowledge that *no one* knows, knowledge lost in the ravages of history.

While the terms of my analysis thus far have included secrecy, in the sense of *consciously* concealed knowledge, the shift that siddha *vaidyas* themselves have performed, from secret to lost knowledge, suggests a similar shift in my analytic categories from secrecy in particular to concealed knowledge more generally. Many of the formal properties of secrecy are easily transferred to lost knowledge. Earlier I argued that my focus on the form of secrecy over its content is not simply a personal bias but also reflects the propensities of siddha medical discourse. This is perhaps most clear when *vaidyas* evoke the texts and medical formulae that have been lost through the vicissitudes of history in asserting the glory of their practice. Georg Simmel points to more general features of concealed knowledge.

> From secrecy, which shades all that is profound and significant, grows the typical error according to which everything mysterious is something important and essential. Before the unknown, man's natural impulse to idealize and his natural fearfulness cooperate toward the same goal: to intensify the unknown through imagination, and to pay attention to it with an emphasis that is not usually accorded to patent reality.[38]

Lost knowledge shares with secret knowledge the quality of being mysterious and inscrutable, a quality that leads people to idealize such knowledge. Lost knowledge, insofar as it is not accessible to *anyone*, is concealed knowledge *par excellence*.

Yet in order to continue to exert force over the imagination, lost knowledge must be also be known in its state of non-existence – it must be remembered that it was possessed in the first place, and in this way it must remain visible. Concealed knowledge, both secret and lost, appears to be feasible insofar as its possessor can make a case that it

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[38] Simmel, 333.

exists or that it once existed. Insofar as it is concealed, it is an empty template which can be colored in (often extraordinary) ways that best serve those who claim to possess it. Like secret knowledge, lost knowledge is often attributed with extraordinary potential, setting it apart from knowledge that can be tested and scrutinized. In their mysterious appeal, secrets which a few know differ little from secrets that no one knows.

What is perhaps more curious is the irony that knowledge that is recognized to be lost by a tradition is at the same time *claimed* by that tradition, absent knowledge testifying to the greatness of a tradition. Lost manuscripts remain the lost treasure of a siddha medical system, still very much present in their rhetorical contribution to the current value of siddha medical techniques. This raises a question that I can only partially address in the following pages. How do actors claim possession over things they admit they do not know? How do siddha *vaidyas* secure lost knowledge as evidence for the value of their tradition?

7.4 Siddha medical manuscripts

> "The document is not the fortunate tool of a history that is primarily and fundamentally memory; history is one way in which a society recognizes and develops a mass of documentation with which it is inextricably linked.[39]

The tangible bases of claims to the ancientness of siddha medicine, palm leaf manuscripts are also the sources through which the reconstruction of a pure Tamil siddha medical system has been advanced. Private organizations and regional and national government institutions have collected thousands of these manuscripts in the last century, housing them in archives and libraries throughout Tamil Nadu.[40] The knowledge set out

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[39] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1993 [1969]), 7.

[40] For a list of siddha medical manuscripts and the various libraries in which they are housed, see Madhavan, *Siddha Medical Manuscripts in Tamil*, appendix.

in these texts is important for individual practitioners and medical colleges alike. The latter read them as recipe books for different medicines, ignoring the more "superstitious" elements such as those that depict the world of the siddhars or that urge the *vaidya* to worship the goddess in conjunction with the formulation of medicines. However, it is not this easily available medical knowledge which is cited in conjunction with the most fantastic estimations of the potential of the system as a whole, but rather it is those elements which are obscured, no longer through deliberate obfuscation but now through the unavoidable decay of history.

Just as the call to systematize the knowledge of individual *paramparais* implies the naturalness of a synchronic, Tamil-speaking community, the notion that there has been a radical "break" with the Tamil medical past implies a natural temporal continuity as well, a proper inheritance of tradition. It is in this sense that V. R. Madhavan, a scholar of Tamil manuscripts, speaks of the loss of palm-leaf texts.

> Manuscripts on palmleaf or paper of the ancient works are the great treasures solely inherited by the Tamils. Many of Siddha medical manuscripts were destroyed by white ants, fire and water and some were taken away by foreigners. Even among those that have escaped the ravages of time the works which have so far been destined to see the light of day are only a few.[41]

Many extant Tamil manuscripts are unreadable in parts, an essential ingredient for a medical preparation consumed by a worm or termite, leaving a hole in the manuscript and a doubt in medical knowledge that is not only lamented by practitioners as the loss of a great medicine, but which also creates an inscrutable space in which claims to glory are expressed. Only a few of these have been edited and published while the vast majority lie unread, their contents disintegrating despite the best efforts and strongest chemicals applied by conservationists.

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[41] Ibid., 52.

The loss of these manuscripts is often equated with death, not only of the manuscripts themselves but also of Tamil tradition and community as a whole. In his autobiographical account of his search for palm-leaf manuscripts, G. John Samuel depicts his recovery mission in terms of mortality.

> Considering those who have passed away, thinking of them with terrible mental anguish and deep hurt on account of this loss, people who live on suffer in so many ways... How do those of a linguistic community face such great losses, the likes of which make individuals tremble? How do they bear those losses? My attempts to acquire and restore Tamil palm-leaf manuscripts were in part born out of these concerns.[42]

It is a linguistic community which Samuel sees as helping individuals deal with the sorrow of death. Benedict Anderson points out that insofar as national communities transcend the mortality of individuals, they offer a secular replacement for religion in providing individuals with the comforting possibility of immortality.[43] Even if we dispute Anderson's somewhat simplistic model of nationalism replacing religion, he is right, I feel, to point to one of the functions that all communities, however defined, share: they provide an individual with a locus of identity that transcends the life of that individual, preceding her and so providing the conditions into which she was born, and continuing after her death. Insofar as an individual actively and consciously identifies with this greater self, the community offers that individual the vestiges of immortality.

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[42] "ittakaiya iḻappukkaḷ ēṟpaṭuttiya āḻamāṉa kāyaṅkaḷōṭum koṭiya maṉa vētaṉaikaḷōṭum maṟaintupōṉa nalla uḷḷaṅkaḷai eṇṇi eṇṇi vḷḷum uḷḷaṅkaḷ eppaṭiyellām paritavikkiṉṟaṉa eṉpataiyum nāṉ aṭikkaṭi eṇṇippārttatuṇṭu. taṉimaṉitarkaḷai naṭunaṭuṅkavaikkum itupōṉṟa pēriḻappukkaḷai oru moḻikkuḻuviṉar (Linguistic Community) eppaṭic cantikkiṉṟaṉar û avaṟṟai eppaṭit tāṅkik koḷkiṉṟaṉar eṉṟa eṉatu cintaṉaiyiṉ oru pakutiyākavē tamiḻ ōlaiccuvaṭikaḷ paṟṟiya eṉatu tēṭṭa muyaṟcikaḷum mīṭpuppaṇikaḷum amaintuḷḷaṉa." Cāmuvēl, muṉṉurai.

[43] Anderson, 9-12. Aladair MacIntyre also makes this point, noting that "the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past... The possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide." In Aladair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 221.

Continuity in the transmission of knowledge lends itself to biological metaphors of generation and death. From Vedic times, oral transmission has represented a new birth or re-birth, as the initiation to Vedic study, *upanayana*, is the "second birth" of the student who becomes "twice born" (*dvija*).[44] Transmission is thus a re-generation of knowledge that marks continuity from one generation to the next, while any break in this chain signifies the death of that knowledge. Indeed, Samuel speaks of destroyed manuscripts as the lost, literary "children" of "mother" Tamil, drawing on the metaphor of the goddess of Tamil that has played such a large role in deifying the Tamil language as an object of devotion.[45]

> Mother Tamil (*Tamiḻttāy*) stands weeping and helpless, losing so many literary children (*ilakkiyap piḷḷaikaḷ*) to the cruel dance of time, to the fury of nature, to the heat of fire, and to the floods of swollen rivers... How many of her artistic treasures have been lost because of the indifference and the superstitions (*mūṭanampikkaikaḷ*) of people on this soil? How many of her literary children were sacrificed in the name of the cruelty of men in times of religious conflict? How many of her creations of refined Tamil were lost in times of the invasion of others and the spread of outsiders? How many of the literary children of Tamil even today are caught in the creeping hands of death, slowly dying in all the unreachable corners of various foreign countries. This book resulted from my search for these [literary children].[46]

These manuscripts are not the products of individuals, nor of the siddhars, but of an ethnic, linguistic community unified in the symbol of a mother. Speaking in the language

[44] Harmut Scharfe, *Education in Ancient India* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 87-88.

[45] On Mother Tamil and language devotion, see Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue.*

[46] "intat tamiḻttāy tāṉ peṟṟeṭutta ettaṉaiyō ilakkiyap piḷḷaikaḷaik kālattiṉ kōrattāṇṭavattiṟkum centaḻaliṉ vemmaikkum, peruki ōṭiya natikaḷiṉ nīrpperukkiṟkum tāraivārttuk koṭuttuk kaiyaṟṟu aḻutu pulampi niṉṟuḷḷāḷ... immaṇṇil vāḻnta maṉitarkaḷiṉ mūṭanampikkaikaḷālum kavaṉakkuṟaivālum avaḷ iḻantu niṉṟa kalaiccelvaṅkaḷ tāṉ ettaṉai ettaṉai! camayap pūcalkaḷiṉpōtu maṉitak koṭumaikkāka avaḷ palikoṭutta ilakkiyak kuḻantaikaḷ tāṉ ettaṉai ettaṉai! māṟṟār paṭaiyeṭuppiṉpōtum vēṟṟār cūḻcciyiṉpōtum avaḷ iḻantu niṉṟa centamiḻp paṭaippukkaḷ tāṉ ettaṉai ettaṉai! cāviṉ koṭiya karaṅkaḷil cikki ulakiṉ palvēṟu nāṭukaḷiṉ mūlai mūṭukkukaḷilellām iṉṟum paṭippaṭiyākac cettuk kkoṇṭirukkum tamiḻ ilakkiya matalaikaḷ tāṉ ettaṉai ettaṉai! ivaṟṟait tēṭum eṉatu muyaṟciyai aṭittaḷamākak koṇṭu malarntatē innūl eṉpēṉ." Cāmuvēl, muṉṉurai.

of Tamil revivalism, Samuel likens a break in the transmission of manuscripts to a death in the Tamil family. While the reasons for the loss of manuscripts are both natural and social, the legacy of foreign impact is primary because it has made Tamils indifferent to their manuscripts, and because many manuscripts were taken out of Tamil Nadu and are now "slowly dying" in foreign countries.

Samuel portrays himself as a good son, a loyal member of a community that he conceives as a family. His conviction that Tamil language, culture and literature is equal to any in the world came at a young age, flowing "in my blood" and "inscribing itself deeply in me."[47] He struggles to explain this *physiological* devotion to Tamil, especially given that he grew up in Neyur, a town in the southern district of Kanya Kumari that was a center of the Anglicizing project of Christian missionaries. He contrasts himself not only to his family and childhood acquaintances, but more importantly to Tamil scholars and local government ministers and authorities who declare that all the valuable Tamil manuscripts have already been published and that the rest are "trash" (*kuppaikaḷ*). These people, Samuel castigates, win the trust of the people with the words "my body is of the soil and my soul of Tamil" ("uṭal maṇṇukku uyir tamiḻukku"), but they subsequently neglect their "mother tongue." Their "Tamil feeling" (*tamiḻuṇarvu*), Samuel concludes, is the "fake deceit of their work."[48]

What defines this "Tamil feeling" is a nostalgia for the past, visions of utopia that I have outlined.

> My heart began to imagine the revolution in knowledge that occurred in past society through these palm-leaf manuscripts. Scenes that I had heard of kids in traditional schools writing with awls appeared often before my mental eye. Shadowy visions of great poets taking their awls and writing on manuscripts, nourishing the garden of Tamil literature, appeared to me.

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[47] Ibid., 1.

[48] Ibid., 13-14.

> Every time I saw a palm-leaf manuscript, my mind was intoxicated with joy. But still, I was not able to read clearly the letters written on those [manuscripts].[49]

Samuel's evocative fantasies of the utopia that was traditional Tamil society is aroused by the mere sight of Tamil manuscripts, manuscripts whose content, he admits, were opaque to him. This juxtaposition of enchantment and ignorance is no coincidence, but in fact the illegibility of the manuscripts to Samuel meant that he could "read" into them his own fertile visions. The particular effectiveness of concealed knowledge through history is that it is pliant enough to accommodate a variety of shifting contexts and agendas.

While extant unreadable manuscripts evoke utopian visions, lost manuscripts do so even more, in that one of the great cycles of the destruction of Tamil texts occurred with the submerging of Lemuria.

> Many rare and precious texts of the great siddhars, which definitively prescribe the best way for everyone to achieve a good life, have been destroyed in many different ways and at many different occasions due to the neglect of our ancestors and to the changes of nature. Rich treasurehouses of the siddhars' ideas were lost, both when the Lemurian continent was submerged in the Indian Ocean at the time of the first academy, and when Kannaki, seeing the mistake of the Pandyan king, made Madurai city prey to fire during the last academy.[50]

"Tamil feeling" compels the evaluation of the unknown in Tamil tradition as precious and valuable, arising in conjunction with visions of Tamil utopia. The history of the

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[49] "e̱natu uḷḷam mīṇṭum mīṇṭum kaṭanta kālaccamutāyattil paṉaiyōlaic cuvaṭikaḷiṉ vāyilāka nikaḻnta aṟivup puraṭciyaik kaṟpaṉai ceytu pārkkat toṭaṅkiyatu. tiṉṉaippaḷḷikaḷil ciṟuvarkaḷ eḻuttāṇi koṇṭu eḻutiyatāka nāṉ kēṭṭaṟinta kāṭcikaḷ ellām maṉakkaṇmuṉ aṭikkaṭit tōṉṟikkoṇṭē iruntaṉa. perumpulavarkaḷ eḻuttāṇi koṇṭu ēṭṭil eḻuti eḻutit tamiḻ ilakkiyaccōlaiyai vaḷamūṭṭiya kāṭcikaḷ maṉattiraiyil niḻalāṭiṉa. ōlaiccuvaṭikaḷaik kāṇumpōtellām maṉam kaḷippaṭaintatai uṇarkiṟēṉ. eṉiṉum avaṟṟiluḷḷa eḻuttukkaḷai eṉṉāl appōtu teḷivākap paṭikka muṭiyavillai." Ibid., 4-5

[50] "nāmaṉaivarum nalvāḻvu peṟum naṉṉeṟikaḷai varaiyaṟutu, aṟutiyiṭṭuk kūṟum, arumperum cittarkaḷiṉ ariya pala nūlkal, nammuṉṉōrkaḷiṉ acaṭṭaiyiṉālum, iyaṟkai māṟutalkaḷiṉālum palacamayam, palvēṟu vaḻikaḷil aḻikkap peṟṟuḷḷaṉa. cittarkaḷiṉ cīriya karuttuk karuvūlaṅkaḷ, mutaṟcaṅka kālattil ilemūriyaāk kaṇṭam, intu makā samuttirattil mūḻkiyapoḻtum – kaṭaiccaṅka kālattil pāṇṭiya maṉṉaṉiṉ tavaṟu kaṇṭu vekuṇṭeḻunta kaṇṇaki maturai mānakarait tīkkiraiyākkiya pōtum, avaṟṟil cikki aḻivu paṭṭaṉa." P. Muttukkaruppa Piḷḷai, 36-37.

manuscripts is often read within this revivalist history, leading to a view that the most effective medical knowledge was set out in the oldest manuscripts. The manuscripts we can see are just remnants of vast "treasure-houses" (*karuvūlaṅkaḷ*) of medical knowledge that have been lost.

While the extant manuscripts are evidence for the existence of lost manuscripts which remain the precious treasure of Tamils, the assertion that much has been lost in turn makes what remains all the more precious.

> Even though we know of countless texts that were written at the time of the last academy, only a few of those are still available to us. Through those few texts which have survived all these sorts of destruction and which we have in our hands, it is clear that our ancestors attained great expertise in wisdom, clarity, research and service, and rose to the foremost position as the greatest race in the world. With all the great texts written by the siddhars which will still have, is there any limit to the benefits we can obtain?[51]

Perfect in their ancient core, they have, however, become obscured through historical processes. V. R. Mathavan writes of the perfection of the system, a perfection which will be achieved if only the knowledge is recovered from obscurity. "Siddha system is a complete system. . . . It may be asked that while Siddha Medicine is a perfect, unique and superior system, why has it not become popular. The answer is, defective books as well as defective use of books which about in Siddha Medical Literature…"[52] Recent editions of the manuscripts have been published, yet Madhavan laments the quality of these editions. "All the books as they are now, are without any doubt, spurious works, mostly badly copied and printed. Though the books are spurious, a good percentage of them

[51] "kaṭaiccaṅka kālattil iyaṟṟa... eṉṉaṟṟa ēṭukaḷum iruntiruppatākat terintālum, namakkuk kiṭaippavai mikac cilavēyākum. ivvāṟu palvakai aḻivukaḷiliruntum tappip piḻaittu nam kaikaḷukkuk kiṭaitta oru cila nūṟkaḷiṉ vāyilākavē, nam muṉṉōrkaḷ aṟivilum, teḷivilum, āyvilum, āṟṟalilum mikka tērcci peṟṟu ulakiṉ mutal iṉamākan [sic] talai nimirntu niṟkum nilai peṟṟiruntār eṉpatu teḷivākumpoḻutu, cittarkaḷ iyaṟṟiya cemmai nūṟkaḷellām, namakkuk kiṭṭiruppiṉ avaṟṟāl nām peṟum naṟpayaṉkaḷukkōr ellaiyān iruntirukkumō?" Ibid., 37.

[52] V. R. Madhavan, *Siddha Medical Manuscripts in Tamil,* v-vi.

have got some proportion of stray valuable contents, which have come from the ages past."[53] Not only have thousands of the most valuable manuscripts been lost, but even the manuscripts that are available today are full of mistakes. It is a testament to the prior brilliance of ancient Tamil society that anything of value remains.

What has been for the most part lost, then, is not only precious medical knowledge, and not only the continuity of the siddha medical legacy, but also an important link to the ancient Tamil community. But this connection has not been completely severed, and the knowledge and luster of ancient Tamil culture, the "treasure" of the Tamils, can be recovered.

> There are still thousands of siddha medical manuscripts that have not been printed. Skillful siddha doctors are decreasing. Diagnosis by pulse reading is not explained well, not taught, and not practiced. Important siddha medical truths lie buried as archeological material, needing to be researched and revealed. Thousands of texts have been destroyed. They are still decaying. Some excellent siddha medicines have not been prepared or used for about two thousand years. This medical system has been crushed by other medical systems for 2000 years. Now is the time to give it a measure of new life. We urge our Tamil Nadu government to nurture and encourage this great medical system.[54]

The goal, most agree, is to "systematize" the texts. Manuscripts must be collected from private homes and foreign countries, and gathered together in Tamil Nadu, their place of origin, and their contents compared. They must be edited and published so that they are available to the public. This is the motivation behind S. Chidambarathanu Pillai's

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[53] Ibid., 53.

[54] "iṉṉum āyirakkaṇakkāṉa citta maruttuva nūlkaḷ ōlaikaḷākavum, accaṭikkappaṭāmalum, irukkiṉṟaṉa. ciṟanta citta maruttuvarkaḷ kuṟaintu varukiṉṟaṉar. nāṭi nitāṉa muṟai nalla muṟaiyil teḷivvākkappaṭāmalum, kaṟpikkappaṭāmalum, paḻakkuvikkappaṭāmalum irukkiṟatu. ciṟanta citta maruttuva uṇmaikaḷ putai poruḷkaḷākavum, ārāyntu kaṇṭupiṭikka vēṇṭiyavaikaḷākavum irukkiṉṟaṉa. āyirak kaṇakkāṉa nūlkaḷ aḻikkappaṭṭuviṭṭaṉa. aḻintu koṇṭu varukiṉṟaṉa. ciṟanta citta maruttuva maruntukaḷ ēṟakkuṟaiya 2 āyiram āṇṭukaḷākac ceyyappaṭāmalum, kaiyāḷappaṭāmalum irukkiṉṟaṉa. 2 āyiram āṇṭukaḷāka vēṟṟu muṟaikaḷāl nacukkappaṭṭu maṟaikkappaṭṭuviṭṭa immuṟai ippoḻututāṉ ōraḷavu puttuyiraḷikkappaṭṭu varukiṟatu. immuṟaiyai nalla muṟaiyil pēṇi vaḷarkka namatu tamiḻaka aracu ūkkam koṭuttuvaruvatu mikavum varavēṟkattakkatu." Kastūri.

founding of the Siddha Medical Literature Research Centre. The original charter of the center gives fourteen objectives, of which the first is: "The truths of siddha medicine, contained in thousands of manuscripts, are decaying. These great and rare siddha medical texts which have yet to be published must be collected, researched and published in a proper manner and within a specified time."[55] Research here is primarily textual and does not yield new discoveries but re-discoveries of ancient knowledge. Research in this sense is the forging of continuities between the present Tamil community and the ancient Tamil community that it imagines, an attempt to reconstitute a Tamil community not limited to, nor by, the modern world.

Most *vaidyas* appeal to the government to do this work, assuring that if these texts are collected and the knowledge contained in them recovered, siddha medicine will rise to its prior position as the preeminent medical system in the world.

> So many manuscripts are decaying with families. These are old and worn and are deteriorating, of no use to those [who possess them] nor to others. In those very texts, many rare treasures lie hidden. Tamils themselves must come forward and donate these. The government must also establish separate committees for this, which will go to every corner of the Tamil land, collect these rare treasures, examine all the medicines in them, and organize them so that they are useful for the people of the world... If basic steps such as these are taken, Tamil medicine will flourish forever.[56]

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[55] "citta maruttuva uṇmaikaḷ āyiramāyiram ēṭṭup piratikaḷil muṭaṅki aḻintu varukiṉṟaṉa. ituvarai veḷivarāta arumperum citta maruttuva nūṟkaḷai kuṟippiṭṭa kālavarampukkuḷ muṟaippaṭi cēkarittu, āyntu accēṟṟi veḷiyiṭal." "Citta Maruttuva Ārāycci Nilaiya Kuṟikkōḷ" ["The Goals of the Siddha Medical Literature Research Centre"], in *Citta Maruttuva Nūl Ārāycci Nilaiyam Mupperum Viḻā Malar*, 8.

[56] "ettaṉaiyō kuṭumpaṅkaḷil pala ēṭṭuccuvaṭikaḷ muḷaṅkik kiṭakkiṉṟaṉa. avai avarkaḷukkum, maṟṟavarkaḷukkum payaṉpaṭāmal cellarittu aḻintupōkum nilaiyil uḷḷaṉa. avaṟṟilē pala ariya pokkiṣaṅkaḷ maṟaintu kiṭakkalām. tamiḻarkaḷ tāmākavē muṉvantu avaṟṟai aḷittiṭavēṇṭum. aracum itaṟkeṉa taṉik kuḻukkaḷai amaittu tamiḻakattiṉ mūlai muṭukkukkellām ikkuḻukkaḷ ceṉṟu, ivvariya pokkiṣaṅkaḷai tiraṭṭacceytu, atil uḷḷa maruntukaḷai yellām kaṇṭaṟiyacceytu, atai ivvulaka makkaḷukku payaṉpaṭum vakai ceyyalām... ivai pōṉṟa pala ākka rītiyāṉa ceyalil īṭupaṭṭāl tamiḻ maruttuvam eṉṟeṉṟum vāḻntu vaḷarntu koṇṭirukkum." Uttamarāyaṉ, 18.

The recuperation of siddha medical knowledge will reestablish the link with the utopian Tamil past, thereby reuniting a timeless, unnaturally divided community. Tamil medicine can bestow immortality because it is itself part of an immortal tradition.

7.5 Conclusion

The ideals of open knowledge, systematization, and publication have, in the practice of siddha medicine, been the grounds for a critique of secrecy. Siddha *vaidyas* thus claim the prestige offered by secrecy through different means, by pointing to a "treasurehouse" of siddha medical knowledge that has been destroyed by the furies of nature and the invasions of foreigners. This not only enables them to continue to imbue their medicine with extraordinary potential, but it also accords with international efforts to preserve histories and cultures. For example, Samuel's Institute of Asian Studies' work in collecting, editing, and publishing palm-leaf manuscripts receives Japanese funding and is part of UNESCO's "Memory of the World Project." The interests of this UNESCO project are similar to those voiced by Andrew Cardew in August, 1918, when he asserted that any colonial interest in ayurveda was for "antiquarian" purposes. Siddha medical manuscripts, according to the language of UNESCO, are part of the "memory" of the world, not its future. The goals of siddha *vaidyas* in preserving their texts and practices are far more urgent, consisting of the preservation of their tradition, their community as they conceive it, and their livelihoods. That these objectives only vaguely correspond to those of international concerns matters little, as *vaidyas* will accept any global support that is available.

Many note the irony of the loss of transmission, the "death" of the formula for immortality. "Isn't it pitiful to think that today siddha medicine, which discovered

medicines that bestow immortality, today has to be rescued from a state of dying!"[57] However, the sorrow of this loss is at the same time a powerful basis of *hope,* because it is juxtaposed with the assertion that not all has been lost. The current state of siddha medical knowledge is just a pale reflection of its former glory, yet this reflection contains in it the seeds for a reconstruction of the original. Like all the vague locations of siddha medical glory, lost manuscripts are not entirely invented but are evidenced in the thousands of manuscripts that are currently decaying. While it is these *disintegrating* texts that serve as a basis to contemporary claims to possess absent knowledge, it is their *re-integration*, their collection from selfish *vaidyas* and foreign archives and relocation in public, Tamil space, which will initiate the recovery of this perfect medicine. The promise of the revival of this lost tradition is treated as no less than the conquest of death, because it will reestablish links with a timeless community, and more concretely, because it will result in the rediscovery of a medicine that can bestow immortality. This project will restore siddha medicine to the apex of the world's medical systems, immortalizing the very knowledge viewed as in peril.

[57] "cākā maruntiṉaik kaṇṭu piṭitta cittamaruttuvam cākum nilaiyiliruntu iṉṟu mīṭkap paṭṭirukkiṉṟatu eṉpataṉai niṉaikkum poḻutu paritāpamāka illaiyā!" In the editor's introduction to *Akastiyar Muppu Cūttiraṅkaḷ*, 4.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

The medical practices of doctors, and the medical decisions of patients, are forged out of a myriad of concerns that are much more complex than straightforward "belief" that a particular practice "works." Not only is belief itself a woefully inadequate notion in accounting for medical choice, but the criteria by which effectiveness is evaluated, i.e., what "works," are themselves culturally and historically informed. While penicillin cures many diseases, the complexity of medical experience leaves much to the imagination. In the context of competing medical systems, systems that are often linked to particular communities, politics of culture and identity are also important factors in medical decisions. The character of some of these concerns, I have argued, can be illuminated through an examination of the "traditional" aspects of traditional medicine.

While biomedicine can offer a patient the alleviation of physical distress, siddha medicine offers much more: affiliation to a timeless community, the fantasy of utopia, and, if enough work is done, the possibility of immortality. Patronage of a siddha *vaidya* fulfills one's duty to tradition. Those who ignore these debts and turn to the medicine of foreigners are like the ascetic Jaratkāru who discovered his ancestors dangling upside down in a large cave, supported by a string of grass that was being eaten by a rat. As a celibate renouncer and the last in his lineage, Jaratkāru's neglect of his duty to his ancestors, namely, the perpetuation of his lineage through progeny, had placed them in this perilous position.[1] The siddha medical past is likewise hanging from a thread that is being eaten by a (laboratory) rat, as fragile today as it was glorious in its origins, barely

[1] *Mahābhārata* 1.13.9-30. See *The Mahābhārata*, translated and edited by J.A.B. van Buitenen, vol. 1, *The Book of the Beginning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 69-70.

surviving in a modern world that is dismissive of its theories. The past community lives on but helplessly, depending on the present community to keep it alive. Medical choices read in this context are not only a matter of life or death for the ailing individual but also for the community as a whole, in its past, present, and future incarnations.

If historians of religion have ignored the study of medicine, it has more to do with their own presuppositions than it does with the practice of medicine throughout the world. While anthropologists have for decades considered medical practice to be a cultural practice, imbedded in cosmologies and symbols, historians of religion seem to have accepted the biomedical division between religion and science and the location of medicine squarely in the latter. This view does not, as I have indicated, reflect the way people throughout the world confront the healing process. After all, medicine and religion both seek solutions to the ever-present problems of human suffering and mortality in particular. As Foucault has pointed out, the clinical gaze that perceives disease as an exclusively physical process has emerged from a particular history, a particularly influential history which nevertheless has not eliminated all competition.[2] The world today, certainly outside the West and increasingly so inside it, is marked by medical options that reflect the interaction of diverse medical histories.

The field on which these medical options are played out is not neutral, as biomedicine has an advantage in government support and technological achievement throughout the world. In addressing physical ailments, the success of biomedicine is unquestionable, and so its preeminence in the world today is one that has many advantages. On the other hand, its knowledge has limits and its failures are many, and it is the space offered by these limits that is claimed by practitioners of other medical traditions. Thus the medicines of siddha *vaidyas* often are said to heal chronic ailments

[2] Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic.*

like asthma, diabetes, and cancer, "chronic" because biomedicine has not found a cure. Siddha *vaidyas* also exploit the limits of those other disciplines of knowledge that were aligned with biomedicine in the colonial project, answering for their own purposes the unanswered questions of archeology and giving a Tamil, utopian character to societies and events prior to the historical record. As a site for imagining the world, traditional space becomes particularly important for communities who have been disempowered in their material, economic, or political relationships vis-à-vis other communities.

However, the conscious promotion of siddha medical practice is not simply a backlash against an inhospitable modernity. While I have emphasized that traditions arise in relationship with other traditions, and take their particular contours and characters from these relationships with "others," they are also spaces in which actors exert a great degree of autonomy. This delineation of a safe haven of tradition, within which external critiques lose their force, is an essential part of self-construction, effectively accomplishing the work of identity. Tradition shapes people within a community in similar ways, creating shared bases of culture, shared senses of history, and common notions of truth and duty. Siddha *vaidyas* not only utilize the space offered by the limits of "Western" knowledge, but they also create another, unique space in which they assert their incommensurable tradition. They seek to establish their own rules within this tradition, in which technologies of the "third eye," knowledge gained through intuition, and the uniqueness of hereditary experience serve as the grounds for authority. By asserting the character of their medical practice as a *tradition*, *vaidyas* not only shield their practices from external scrutiny, but also affirm and shape a diachronic, Tamil community.

Siddha *vaidyas* implore Tamil individuals to act according to their duty as Tamils and so to patronize siddha medicine. The construction of social identity succeeds only when it elicits recognition on the part of the individual. This recognition is of a strange

sort – the individual must recognize a social vision at the core of the individual self. The emergent social narrative must tell a story of which the individual feels a part, compelling certain individuals to participate while excluding the participation of other groups and individuals. It compels through appeals to the desires of the individual, but also naturalizes membership such that participation is destined. Participation is conceived as an obligation, while non-participation is a denial of one's true nature, one's family, and one's nation. As a traditional practice, siddha medicine is a conduit for the traditional community, providing the opportunity for individuals to act in traditional ways, to directly participate in the utopian Tamil community.

Tradition is not an old way of thinking but a way of thinking about the old. In particular, it affirms the *presence* of the past, and also the *future* of the past. Because a tradition is in this way conceived to be throughout history, the rhetoric of tradition tends towards that of a timeless essence. Tamil revivalists and siddha *vaidyas* locate Tamil tradition at the origins of humanity and civilization, and thereby equate it with the heights of human civilization and reason. Tamil tradition is the best of the *human* world because it is conceived to be in perfect correspondence with the principles of the *natural* world. It thereby exhausts human aspirations because it *transcends* them, finding its basis not in the fallibility of human invention but in the eternal processes of the cosmos. Tradition is timely because it is timeless.

Siddha *vaidyas* locate their knowledge in this eternal Tamil tradition. Though somewhat compromised by practice, the strict logic of this view that tradition is eternal and perfect does not allow for innovation. Siddha *vaidyas* apply these idioms of immortality, of timelessness, and of the endurance of tradition, to siddha medicines. They aspire to recover the lost formula for *muppu*, the perfect medicine which can heal all disease and bestow immortality. Irā. Kastūri asserts that siddha medicines retain their effectiveness for thousands of years, some of the harder, more dense medical preparations

having been used for many generations in hereditary siddha medical families. Ayurveda, unani, and allopathic medicines, on the other hand, lose their strength after months or even days.[3]

Given these assertions of the immortality of the siddha medical tradition, on the one hand, and the characterization of this tradition as imperiled on the other, these pronouncements of its greatness are perhaps less *descriptions* of a reality which siddha *vaidyas* believe, than they are *performative* acts through which *vaidyas* seek to create the reality they describe. Adikal depicted the Tamil language as not only mimetic, not just reflecting nature, but as a language through which nature can be controlled and mastered. The discourses of siddha *vaidyas* are discourses of hope, of aspiration, and of critique. When a *vaidya* describes siddha medicine as the original medicine of human civilization and in perfect harmony with nature, and then goes on to exclaim "Long live the siddhars! May siddha medicine flourish!", he does not shift registers as much as we may imagine.[4] Tradition looks to the past but only to assert models that might be established in the future.

In conclusion, I will revisit Georg Simmel's remark that "The secret offers, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world; and the latter is decisively influenced by the former."[5] For siddha *vaidyas*, this manifest world is contemporary Tamil society, a world in which they vie for medical authority and clientele with biomedical doctors. *Vaidyas* create a second world not only through secrecy but through all forms of concealed knowledge, whether lost manuscripts or a submerged continent. This nether-world is the location of a glorious Tamil medical system which

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[3] Kastūri, 11.

[4] "vāḻka cittarkaḷ. vaḷarka citta maruttuvam." Perumāḷ, 73.

[5] Simmel, 330.

can cure all ills, and which even offers the holy grail of medical potential – the achievement of bodily immortality. Siddha medicine as it can be apprehended in the contemporary manifest world is a pale shadow of this sublime second world, the degraded presence of the glorious past. The contrast between these two worlds at the same time indicates a relationship between them. The "influence" of this concealed world on the manifest world is that it suggests the work which those with the proper "Tamil feeling" should set for themselves: the recuperation of this obscure world through collecting and systematizing its scattered remains. In other words, *vaidyas* hope to merge these two worlds, to reveal the second world to the first, to make siddha medical knowledge available to public scrutiny. Such a merger, they suggest, will reveal to the world not only the siddha medical knowledge that remains obscured, but also the glory of Tamil medicine and culture that to this point only exists in the hopeful writings of Tamil revivalism.

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